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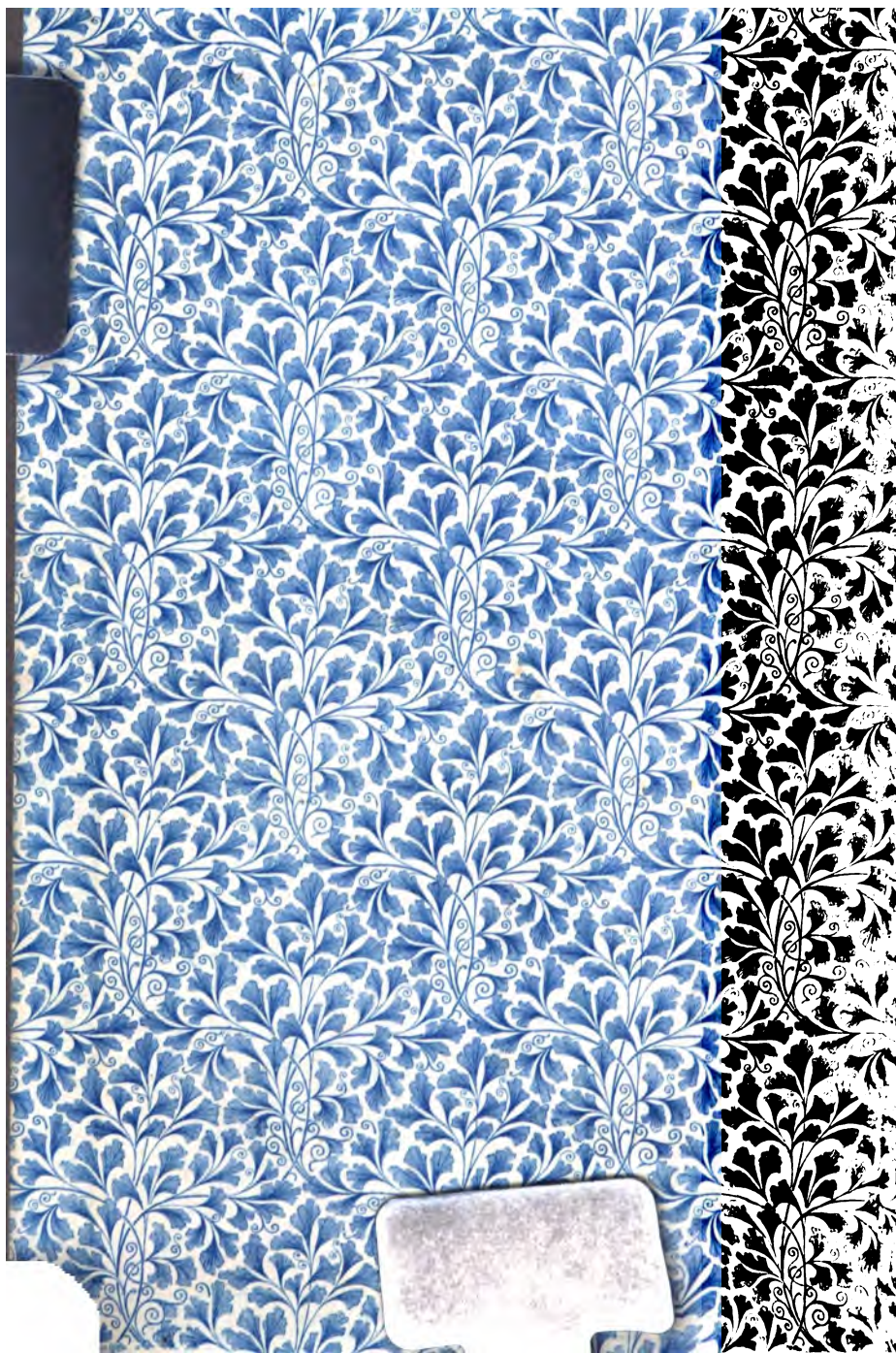
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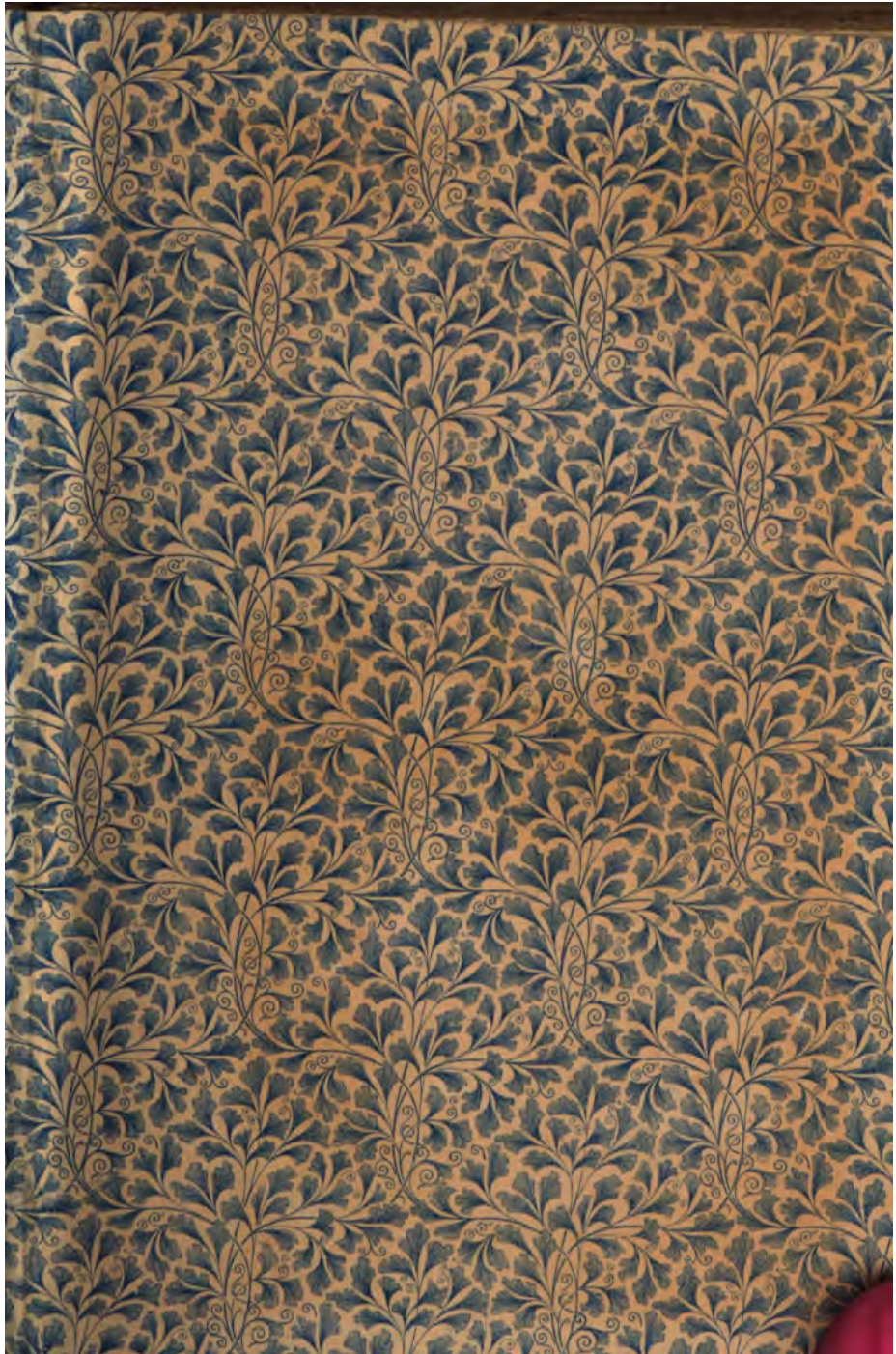
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'Look at her, Matt.'

A
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BY
JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF
BY PROXY 'UNDER ONE ROOF' 'WALTER'S WORD' 'HIGH SPIRITS' ETC



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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TO

WILLIAM BLACK

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

BY HIS FRIEND

THE AUTHOR

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A CONFIDENTIAL AGENT.

CHAPTER I.

THE FAMILY CIRCLE.

THERE is a general impression among country people that all London houses are more or less alike; whereas, as a matter of fact, there are almost as many diversities of form among them as of class. It is true that whole streets have in some localities as absolute a sameness as though they were turned out by a machine; but even where the builder has done his worst to produce a hideous uniformity, it is curious how the tenant, or the lodger, will set him at nought, and effect some change, however small, in

the supposed direction of the picturesque. This is especially the case in the suburbs, where every coign of vantage is seized upon whereon to place some object—from a flower-box to a conservatory—to break the ‘long unlovely street,’ and lend it some touch of beauty. There, every foot of ground is prized and made the most of, in the way of garden, and from the pains that are taken with it may be gathered to no small extent the character of the occupier.

I have in my mind’s eye a long row of suburban villas in the south-western district, very small and but semi-detached, but rejoicing in the high-sounding name of Cavendish Grove. Each pair of these twins in brick was originally the counterfeit presentment of the others; but a bay window or a bow has been thrown out from time to time, or a balcony added, or a verandah, or even but a supplementary porch, which suffices to bestow some little distinctiveness. At the back of each runs a long narrow plot of

ground, of precisely the same length and breadth in all cases, and originally presenting to the beholder but a patch of grass—the Scotch term of ‘back green’ correctly describes them ; but at the present date and season, which is late July, all these are gardens more or less bright with blossom, and paying their voluntary tax in more or less of fragrance to the vagrant summer breeze. So very modest are the means of the dwellers in Cavendish Grove that there is not one greenhouse in the whole row ; the flowers are for the most part of the cheaper kind ; and if a tree is to be seen, be sure it is because Nature herself placed it there, and Man—the enterprising Builder—did not think it worth while to grub it up. No aloes in tubs insult the scanty shrubs that adorn these Paradises ; but there are arbours, small indeed, yet out of all proportion to the pleasure-grounds about them ; grottoes looking like some handful of curiosities which one picks up in an afternoon’s ramble by the sea-shore, and, getting tired of, drops on the

way home ; and fountains of microscopic size.

In summer the inhabitants may be almost said to migrate from their houses into these miniature Edens, which they find to be a cheaper method of obtaining change than by going into the country, or on the Continent, and infinitely more convenient. It may be 'cockneyfied,' but to my thinking it is a pleasant and touching sight to behold these denizens of the City thus making the most of the scanty breathing-space that fate has allotted to them, and playing 'Green-fields and Arcady' on so limited a stage.

The garden of No. 7, Cavendish Grove, is no bigger than the rest, but it is beyond all question the most tastefully laid out. It eschews grottoes ; but in the centre of its little lawn there is a tiny fountain which keeps up, juggler-like, a golden ball, that rises, falls, and climbs again its silver thread, in a very metaphor-suggesting manner. At the end, remote from the house, an elm-tree, that looks quite stately by comparison with

its surroundings, overhangs some garden seats, and helps to keep up the semblance of seclusion. Such lines, indeed, as—

Deep in the shady silence of a vale,
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon and eve's one star,

could, it must be confessed, be hardly applied to this retreat; but it was tolerably sequestered, and at least admitted of the little party at present in occupation of it conversing together unheard and almost unseen. The group consisted but of three persons—Stephen Durham, the proprietor of No. 7, Cavendish Grove, and his nephew Matthew Helston and his wife; the two young people were nominally lodgers, but the three (and one other) all lived together in a manner so friendly and familiar that it would never suggest the relationship of landlord and tenants. Matthew and Uncle Stephen were connected together not only by the blood which is thicker than water—for that, alas! is not always cohesive—but by the far firmer ties of friendship and feeling.

Though the one was a very young man, and the other a septuagenarian, they had tastes and sympathies in common; the older, too, had held out his hand to the younger at a certain crisis of his life, when he had seemed about to lose all footing in the world, and helped him on to firm, or tolerably firm, ground, and Matthew Helston was no ingrate. Benevolence, however, could not be said to be the leading feature of Stephen Durham's character; his tastes were too exceptional, his mode of life had been too secluded, to admit of that: but where he liked he loved, and what he did do for his fellow-creatures was done without stint. His white hair, which was still abundant, and the long white beard, as fine as though it were of spun glass, gave him a venerable and philanthropic appearance; but the keen grey eyes and the deep lines in the wrinkled face somewhat detracted from this. A student and a recluse, he had in fact been at odds with the world from an early date, and had but an indifferent opinion of it. Never-

theless, it was very clear that he made exceptions in this matter, from the expression of content and tenderness with which, as he leant back on the comfortably cushioned garden-seat, he regarded his two companions.

Matthew Helston was a man of about eight-and-twenty, but his thin and delicate features made him appear older. He had an old man's habit, too, when in repose, of supporting his broad and prominent forehead with his fingers, as though it were too heavy for him, and a slow though melodious mode of speech which tended to increase his years in the eyes of others. He was undoubtedly handsome : his brown eyes were large and lustrous, and his brown hair curled crisply over his forehead, in a manner one is wont to associate with the portraits of Byron. But there all similarity between Matthew Helston and the noble poet ended. Delicate of constitution, though not absolutely an invalid, he had none of the vigour or *élan* of youth : his thought had something of the sluggishness as

well as of the maturity of a riper age; without being the victim to morbid disappointment, the consciousness of having missed his mark in life seemed to be ever present with him, and, as he might have himself expressed it—for he was of a mechanical turn—clogged the wheels of being. When alone, a profound melancholy would often settle upon him, but his face when turned to his uncle wore always a look of cheerfulness and content, and when it rested on his young wife never failed to light up with an ineffable tenderness, born of love and a vague fear of loss, which always haunted him in respect to her, and just now more than ever. For Sabey, as he called his Isabel, was as fragile as she was fair, and in a few months would for the first time become a mother. Without being beautiful, she had all the charms that youth and grace and gentleness can bestow on woman. Her hair was brown, like her husband's, but much lighter, and, instead of curling crisply, descended in great folds and masses about her, like a very garment. She

moved with the daintiness and elegance of a fawn, and, like a fawn, was playful and timid. Her dark eyes were bright and animated, as was the whole expression of her features; and, though but few years younger than her husband, she was the antipodes of him in this respect, that she was youth personified, the very type of girlhood. It was as difficult for Matthew to imagine her being laden with the cares of maternity as that a flower should bear a burden, and hence the sharpest of his heart-aches. But he knew little of the nature of women—how not only the hard ones—that is, those who have unsexed themselves and become mean and cruel—are, unfortunately, tough as leather, but even the soft ones—the gentlest, and apparently the most fragile—have, thank Heaven, a miraculous vitality, which, provided they are not wounded through their affections, bears them up against what would seem to be overwhelming odds, both physical and mental.

The labours of the day, which have been

very different in their three cases, are over, and these, the chief personages in our tale, are sitting together in their little garden, at what nuns call 'recreation,' and which was indeed as simple and innocent an amusement as could be indulged in even in a nunnery.

Matthew Helston, with one hand on his wife's shoulder, was reading the last Idyll of the King (which he had brought home with him that day from the publisher's), and the other two were listening to him. His fine and somewhat solemn voice suited well with the Idylls, as did his natural mood, and his wife might well be pardoned for thinking him unrivalled as a reader. Amy, her sister (of whom more anon), used to declare that with a Shakespeare, a couple of candles, and a glass of water, dear Matt could make a fortune in this capacity—in *the provinces*: a qualification that made Sabey very wrath. She was listening to him now as though to the music of the spheres. Old Stephen Durham, with half-shut eyes, and a hollowed hand against his ear, that hinted of his

seventy years, was not so pleased, though he had nothing to find fault with in the reader. Up to the death of Modred he showed no great interest in the narrative, till it arrived at those noble lines,

So all day long the noise of battle rolled
Among the mountains by the winter sea,

when, 'like a horse that hears the corn-bin open,' he pricked his ears and grunted, 'Ha ! that's fine !'

'But it isn't new, uncle,' laughed Sabey. 'That was in the "Mort d'Arthur," you know.'

'Of course, I know, you baggage,' returned he (though he had forgotten it). 'The old songs are best, even of your modern bards, and those too are on the wane. The very song-birds themselves, I do believe, are dying out.'

'Come, tell the truth, uncle,' said Sabey ; 'you are thinking of the Republican black-bird of which we read in the newspaper yesterday.'

'Well, perhaps I was,' confessed the old

man, smiling. 'Any stick suffices to beat a dog with.'

'What was the Republican blackbird?' inquired Matthew.

'Well, it was a bird of *your* feather,' explained the old gentleman; 'the last of those French ones who were taught the "Marseillaise" in 1848. I have heard them myself in the Calvados country; they used to sing in the convent garden, rather to the scandal of the good monks. Some brute, it seems, shot this last one. It was quite grey; but, unlike us Humans, had kept its principles though it had changed its coat.'

'It seems to me you two pick up a deal of information,' observed Matthew, affecting a grumbling air, 'while I am chained to my desk.'

'His *desk*! Did I hear Matt talking of his *desk*?' cried one in clear musical tones from the parlour window, which opened on to some iron steps communicating with the garden. Then, as she ran lightly down them to join the rest, 'Why, Matt sits "with a

crown of gold on a throne," like the king of the Mermen, and only gets off to walk upon Tom Tiddler's ground all among the gold and the silver.'

The fact was, Matthew was the chief clerk, or one of them, in a great jewellers' firm, and detested his employment, over which, as in this instance, his sister-in-law, Amy, was therefore always throwing the glamour of her wit and fancy. Matthew himself would have endeavoured to ignore it, but Amy more wisely strove to take a humorous view both of his work and his master. She was quite like enough to Sabey to be recognised as her sister, but she was like her with all sorts of differences. Though younger by some years, she looked her elder; she was three or four inches taller; her hair and complexion were darker; while their characters themselves, so far as they had been developed, were in great contrast to one another.

Sabey's very being was merged in that of her husband; she saw the world through his

eyes, and almost thought through him—though her thoughts were no second-hand ones in a vulgar sense; whereas Amy was of a masterful and independent spirit. Old Stephen called her ‘the Coming Woman;’—whether she was so or not, she had educated herself in the completest modern style, and carried off the first prize from the Ladies’ College, in itself an immaterial one, but which had subsequently gained her one of the best preferments—namely, a post of one hundred pounds a year—that it lies in the way of governesses to obtain. Up to that date she had been a guest in good Stephen Durham’s little establishment, but now she not only paid her share of the expenses, but had insisted, much to the indignation of the rest, on repaying by degrees her arrears of debt; so that by this time, as they all thought and said (to one another), taking into the account the sunshine that her presence there diffused among them, the obligation was greatly on the other side. Yet she had a hard life of it, had Amy, if a life of toil is necessarily

hard ; she left home immediately after breakfast, and did not return to it till, as on this occasion, the day was well spent and supper-time almost at hand. But then—oh, then—it was to her like coming home from school is to school-boy. Her holiday time began five days in the week at 6 P.M., but on Saturdays earlier ; and unlike most school-boys, she had earned it.

‘Sit down, Amy,’ cried Sabey, with mock imperiousness. ‘I won’t have Matt teased, nor even interrupted. He is reading the “Passing of Arthur.”’

‘All right, dear, let him pass,’ said Amy, and she pulled out from a side pocket some work and a thimble (for she could never be idle even for a moment), and sat down with the rest. Not a word did she interpose for full five minutes, till the reader came to—

Then drew he forth the brand Excalibur,
And o’er him, drawing it, the winter moon,
Brightening the skirts of a long cloud, ran forth,
And sparkled, keen with frost, against the hilt;
For all the haft twinkled with diamond sparks,
Myriads of topaz lights, and jacinth work
Of subtlest jewellery ;

then she exclaimed, 'Oh, what a pity Mr. Signet is not here!'

'Mr. Signet! What on earth can you want him here for?' exclaimed Matthew, indignant at the interruption in so fine a passage, but still more so at the introduction of his employer's name.

'Well,' said Amy, 'because he would enjoy it so; I mean, all about the "diamond sparks" and "topaz lights" and "jacinth work"—it's quite in his way, you know.'

'My dear Amy, I shall never see that passage again,' said Matthew reprovingly, and yet unable to restrain a smile, 'without thinking of the shop. The quotation *is* rather in the jewellery line, certainly!'

'Of course it is; can't you fancy Mr. Signet as the bold Sir Bedivere?'

'No, I can't,' said Sabey frankly.

'Oh, but *I* can,' continued Amy, 'that is, so far as not throwing away Excalibur is concerned. When he saw "the wonder of the hilt," and the diamonds in it, I am sure he could never have thrown it into the water

even the third time. It would have been too much for his professional feelings.'

Matthew had closed the book mechanically at the mention of his employer's name, and his smile was a forced one as he listened to the girl's playful words. 'I think it very hard,' she ran on, 'that you have never introduced me, Matt, to Mr. Signet. He must be like the Prince in the fairy tale, I'm sure, whose words were pearls and diamonds, and at all events he must have plenty of them to give away. If he took a fancy to a young woman—any deserving and well conducted young person like myself, for example—his little *cadeaux* would be worth having; whereas I——'

Here a curious circumstance happened. A rose, presumably urged by a human hand, executed a parabola over the neighbouring wall, and fell at her feet. Its colour immediately communicated itself to the face of the fair speaker, and cut her eloquence short.

'Oh, traitress!' cried Sabey, clapping her hands delightedly. 'Look at her, Matt,

look at her blushing with conscious guilt!’

‘I can’t help people throwing rubbish over the garden wall,’ said Amy, raising her voice so that the offender might hear her. ‘Who *can* it be, I wonder?’

‘I’ll prosecute the fellow,’ cried old Stephen in pretended ire.

‘You had better not, uncle,’ replied Sabey.

‘Why not? don’t spare him on my account, I beg,’ said Amy.

‘Not at all, my dear,’ rejoined her sister. ‘I only thought it dangerous, because he’s a lawyer.’

Everybody knows the satisfaction with which the discomfiture of the wittiest personage in a company is received; and the little party were delighted with this retort, which reduced poor Amy to silence.

Presently she said, with a charming affectation of humility, ‘Frank wants to know whether he may come in to supper.’

‘Oh, *that’s* what a rose thrown over a

garden wall means, is it ?' exclaimed Uncle Stephen, laughing. 'The language of flowers was not so explicit in my time.'

'Nor in mine,' said Matthew. 'The thing reminds me more of those systems of *memoria technica* where a whale in a sentry-box is made to suggest the date of the battle of Hastings, or a camel with a tomtit on its back calls to mind some verse in Revelations.'

'You have not said whether Frank is to come, Sabey,' observed Amy demurely.

'My dear, of course he may come ; pray tell him so.'

'I *have*,' said Amy ; 'at least, if he wasn't to come, I should have thrown the rose back.'

'A simple and ingenious system of telegraphy,' observed Matthew, smiling ; 'and above all,' he added with a sigh, 'it works.'

Matthew Helston was a theoretical inventor ; that is to say, he was the author of some admirable inventions, which seemed

perfect until you tried to put them in practice—when they had failed utterly.

‘I have no doubt,’ said Sabey quickly—for it was not well to let Matthew dwell upon his mechanical disappointments—that Amy could let Mr. Barlow know by a mere change of signal what we have got for supper.’

‘Of course,’ said Amy, who had now quite recovered herself, ‘if I threw him an apple, it would mean crab, or an onion it would signify tripe or Irish stew. The combinations of our connotative code are practically unlimited.’

This last sentence was not only an excellent imitation of Matthew’s style when in his engineering vein, but was delivered with all the gravity and deliberation that distinguished him under such circumstances.

Even Sabey smiled, though she thought it rather irreverent in Amy thus to make fun of Matthew, who, to do him justice, himself joined in the laugh that shook the rest; as it ended, there came like an echo a fainter but

no less appreciative laugh from the other side of the garden wall, which showed that Mr. Barlow, attorney-at-law, had sharp ears and could enjoy a joke.

It was all mere family fun, no doubt, without any pretensions to repartee or epigram; but in the wholesome air of love and home such light things float; nor, it must be confessed, were the company themselves more dense than one occasionally finds to be the case in certain highly rarefied and artificial atmospheres.

CHAPTER II.

A SUBURBAN SYMPOSIUM.

I AM afraid it was a poet, and a true one,
who once wrote,

Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
Is—Lord forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust.

But between the hut and the palace there are many kinds of dwelling houses—Agur's Buildings, as I once heard a house-agent term them, 'because Agur's prayer, you know, was for neither riches nor poverty, and these lots are for your middle-class people:' in these, rather than in the two extremities of the social scale, is true happiness usually to be found, and, moreover, though the statement may be surprising, the best food. The preparation of what one has to eat is an act which is rarely carried to per-

fection by hirelings ; these will provide, indeed, the richest and of course the most expensive dishes, but not (such, at least, is my experience) the daintiest. I have often sat at rich men's feasts and wondered at the seeming relish with which they swallowed things which would never have passed muster with the wives of some men who have but a tenth part of their incomes. For it is the wives who are responsible for these matters, and when they are too proud to give their own superintendence to them, it is the husbands—and, alas! the husbands' friends—who suffer from the omission. If Mrs. Bullion, the millionaire's consort, would only deign to give some of that valuable time and taste which she expends upon the subject of blue china to the things served *on* the china, of course her table would be infinitely better than that of the wife of Mr. Bullion's chief clerk ; but as matters stand, the latter's villa at Bayswater is in many cases positively a better place to dine at than the former's mansion in Eaton Square.

The term 'administrative capacity' is just

now far from being in good odour. When any member of the aristocracy, who cannot spell, and is ashamed or afraid to learn, has been pitchforked into some high position by his influential friends, with that public failure for result that might have been expected, we are always told that, whatever may be—and indeed are—his shortcomings, he has great ‘administrative capacity.’ The phrase has therefore lost some of its force ; but yet there is no other that applies so well to the capable mistress of a household. In the old time it was said of her that she was not afraid of the snow for her maidens by reason of the scarlet cloth she wove to environ them ; but her maidens and she have since then fallen out distressingly. She is really not always to blame if they are not all they ought to be, for the bonds of domestic discipline have been relaxed by circumstances over which she has no control ; but for the ‘food for the household’ she is still answerable, and accordingly as this is good or not, doth she perform or fail in her duty.

No. 7, Cavendish Grove, was not a residence which, judging from its dimensions, you would have set down in your visiting-book under the head 'Places to dine at,' unless you had had experience of its hospitalities; but the fact was that old Stephen Durham was what women call 'very particular' as to what he eat, while both Mrs. Helston and her sister had that artistic skill in the preparation of food which is often found in really refined feminine natures, and would much oftener be put in practice than it is—to the delight and delectation of mankind—but for false pride, and a certain conventional vulgarity which supposes itself to be a delicate fastidiousness. I am no great believer in birth or blood, but I do think that none but a gentleman or lady (in England, at least) can make a salad: there seems to be a consciousness of weakness in many houses of the middle class in this respect, for how else can one account in them for the presence of that hateful compound called 'salad mixture'? Again, let me touch (with

all the delicacy the subject demands) upon pie-crust: few young ladies, it is true, can make it; fewer still will own to ever having stooped to such a task; but when they can and do, I should like to see the male French cook that could rival them. There are certain snow-flakes on the top of it that only the lightest and most delicate hand can compass. I had once the honour of being invited to a dinner, cooked by two young ladies, which I protest threw all the club feasts of which I have ever partaken into the shade—pardon a digression evoked by a sublime reminiscence; the household of which we speak had not, of course, the materials for such a banquet. But on the little parlour table, that July evening, there was a supper, of small cost, and destitute of all the accessories of fashion save a few sweet flowers, which was cooked by divinities and fit for gods. A couple of chickens with a salad, a raspberry and currant tart, and some strawberries and cream, make but a small figure in a *menu*; but had you tasted that salad and that tart, your grace

after such a repast would have expressed, let us hope, a genuine gratitude.

Mr. Frank Barlow, a lawyer of seven-and-twenty or so, was the only guest ; he was far from being a stranger to the company, although strikingly unlike them in appearance ; a good-looking blonde-bearded young fellow, with keen eyes for a flaw in a document, but which were not just now in search of flaws. He had been recently made a partner in a small but thriving legal firm, the business of which, to judge by his intelligent face, he was likely to increase ; and he was about to be made a partner, as may have been guessed, in another firm, whereof the junior member was now present, and had consented to merge her name in his, and be known for the future no more as Amy Thurlow, but as Mrs. Barlow. The little party, therefore, even with this addition, may be still considered as a family group.

Barlow was complimenting his host, as he well might, upon the excellence of his entertainment ; and especially upon the con-

tents of the claret jug, wherein 'cup' had been brewed by certain celestial fingers.

'Well, yes, sir, I like to have things good about me,' returned the old man, well pleased, but in a slightly Johnsonian manner which was natural to him save when speaking to those very intimate with him. 'I cannot think but that I am come of the race of some rich king or prince in former times ; for never yet saw I any man that had a greater desire to be a king and rich than I have, and that only that I may make good cheer, do nothing, and plentifully enrich all honest and learned men.'

It was rather embarrassing to Mr. Frank Barlow that he was often in doubt whether his host was quoting from Rabelais, or some other recondite author, or speaking in his own proper person. He contented himself on this occasion with replying that riches were of greater advantage even to the wise and philosophic than was supposed, quite apart from the good they enabled their possessor to bestow on others ; because they set

the mind free from sordid cares. Whether he had any thought in his mind of Matthew's case or not, the latter seemed to take the allusion to himself, for he looked up and said, 'For my part, Barlow, I think nothing so bad for man or woman as the possession of great wealth.'

'There is the danger of purse-pride, no doubt,' allowed the lawyer. 'I have noticed, too, that the richer a man grows, the more dogmatic—and as a rule the less valuable—his opinions become; he is surrounded with expectants, and therefore meets with little contradiction.'

'That is not what Matt means,' put in his wife. 'His objection to great wealth is that it petrifies the feelings.'

'It is curiously—though, it is true, somewhat grossly—illustrative of its bad effects,' observed the old man, 'how all jewels of great price—what one may call historic jewels—have been mixed up with fraud and crime. Take, for example, the history of the Koh-i-noor—which extends from authentic

records over 2,000 years—of what cruelty and bloodshed has it not been the cause since Nadir Shah compelled the great-grandson of Aurungzebe to change turbans with him.'

'What did he do that for?' inquired Amy.

'Well, Mohammed Shah was so indiscreet as to wear the gem in his turban during his interview with his conqueror, and the latter proposed exchanging headgear in proof of amity. Then Runjeet Sing compelled his guest and prisoner, Shah Shujah, who wore the thing on his arm, to part with it for a nominal sum; and afterwards on his death-bed was himself only prevented from leaving it out of the family from the circumstance that he was too weak to sign his name. Fortunately, he could only signify assent by a nod of his head.'

'If it was in presence of witnesses, one might have made a nice point of that,' observed Barlow.

'The strangest fact about the jewel,' continued Uncle Stephen, with sublime indiffer-

ence to this professional interruption, 'was that it lost four-fifths of its original weight through unskilful cutting. Poor Borgio, who so bungled it, had to pay all his possessions to the Emperor Aurungzebe, and very narrowly saved his head.'

'If Mr. Signet had been the emperor, the man would have lost it to a dead certainty,' remarked Amy: an observation which received general assent except from Matthew, who said nothing; his countenance even expressed dissatisfaction, which caused Mr. Barlow—who was always trying to smooth matters all round, though (through want of knowledge of the actual state of affairs) not always with the desired success—to remark, 'I dare say Mr. Signet is not such a bad fellow away from his business.'

'You might just as well say, Frank, that apart from his colour a blackamoor was white enough,' observed Amy.

'Well, for my part,' returned the lawyer, 'I like a man to be wrapped up in his own calling—that is, of course' (here he stam-

mered and looked at Matthew) 'in his natural calling. No doubt, from all I hear, the man's manner is bad ; but there are lots of men with bad manners who are in reality very decent fellows.'

'That is not like your knowledge of mankind, Mr. Barlow,' observed Uncle Stephen, as he poured a spoonful of custard over his currant tart. 'Mr. Signet himself would tell you that in a pearl of bad appearance the layers generally become more dull and lustreless as you remove them. When the outer skin has no polish, there is small hope indeed for the kernel.'

'On the other hand,' said the lawyer quickly, 'there is such a thing as a rough diamond.'

The young fellow meant well, but it was clear to his betrothed that the topic he was pursuing was distasteful to at least one member of the little company. 'My dear Frank,' whispered she significantly, 'when one finds a rough diamond, the very best thing that can be done with it is to cut it.'

‘Well, I must say I differ with you as to the mode of treatment of the subject,’ he answered in the same low tones. ‘It is an unpleasant one, I allow ; but it is ridiculous to ignore it. It is much better to meet these things face to face.’

‘What, Mr. Signet ?’

‘Well, yes, even Mr. Signet himself. In view of Mr. Durham’s wonderful knowledge of the history of precious stones, for example, which Matt tells me he has at his finger-ends (as indeed he seems to have everything), would it not be politic to ask the man to the house ? You have no idea how the wheel of business when rusty, or, as in this case, somewhat out of gear, is capable of being lubricated and set right by a little social attention. Whenever I found things the least unpleasant at the office with Bates I always made a point of dropping in at Mrs. Bates’s “at homes” on the Saturday afternoons. Then, over the lemonade and ices, Bates and I rubbed each other’s angles down, and all was smooth again.’

Amy shook her head. 'This matter goes deeper, I fear; and there is no pretty Mrs. Bates in the case, sir, to make things pleasant for everybody. The fact is, Matt hates his work and hates his master.'

Mr. Barlow shrugged his shoulders. There was a slight contempt in the action which did not escape his companion.

'You are not to suppose, Frank, that Matt complains,' she said quickly. 'He always does his duty without a murmur. But as to Mr. Signet, I don't think he would ever ask him to this house; nor would he come, perhaps, if he was asked.'

'Do you mean to say he would think it was "cheeky" in his subordinate?'

'I think, from what I have heard of him, he certainly would.'

Mr. Barlow, with half-shut eyes, indulged in a silent but hearty fit of merriment—a device which native prudence and much attendance at courts of law had taught him.

'That is really very funny,' he said—
'Mr. Signet thinking it a condescension to

come here !' And his eye wandered from one to the other tenants of the little parlour, to rest at last on Amy herself, as a bee might settle after his tour of some rich garden upon the fairest flower of all. 'The man must be a fool, my darling.'

'On the contrary, he is a very shrewd fellow.'

'Um ! that makes it worse,' mused Mr. Barlow. 'I am really sorry for poor Matt. Has he to go out to-night ?'

'Yes, if you can call it night. He starts at three in the morning.'

'Great Heaven ! And her ladyship is not over-punctual, I suppose ?'

'She sometimes keeps him waiting for hours. Hush ! Matt is looking this way, and sees we are talking about him. It is a very sore subject.'

CHAPTER III.

GREEN AGE AND HOARY YOUTH.

AFTER supper Mrs. Helston sat down at the little piano, and played to Amy's singing. The former, though far from being an artist, was a creditable performer, and from long practice suited with her sister's voice—which was a very sweet one—better, perhaps, than a better player would have done. Their materials were very simple, chiefly old ballads set to well-known airs; but the effect produced was surprisingly good. With the present audience, at all events, it was much more successful than any of those elaborate performances would have been that appeal so importunately to the ear in fashionable drawing-rooms, the difficulty of executing which, even when surmounted, irresistibly reminds one of Dr. Johnson's famous re-

joinder. Every word was distinctly heard, and, still more wonderful, was worth hearing; for Uncle Stephen exceedingly objected to the usual sacrifice of sense to sound. He used to tell a story, which we have no reason to disbelieve, of having heard a young lady sing 'Thou who so gently walkest over me,' and who stuck to the assertion that so the line ran. She had sung it so for years, and no one had objected to it before; and she did not at all see that it must needs be addressed to a flea or a fly, as he had pointed out. It was with the utmost difficulty that she was persuaded to accept 'watchest' as the right reading.

When the fine old ballads were finished, I am sorry to say that Mr. Frank Barlow put in a request for the African melody of 'Some folks do,' which was executed with great spirit, and brought the evening to a most hilarious conclusion; for Mr. Barlow generally took his leave about half-past ten at latest. He was a practical man, who believed in such proverbs as 'Early to bed,'

&c., though perhaps he was not so solicitous about becoming 'wise' as 'wealthy.' If he had been a sailor or a salesman, instead of a lawyer, he would have buckled to his calling and made himself equally at home with it, for a calling was with him but the means to an end. He had no particular bent, and his tastes were those of the public at large, and the reverse of fastidious. In spite of which, as often happens, he felt considerable contempt for those whom Nature had endowed in a less lavish manner; nor am I quite certain that his very choice of a song had not been made with a view of moral reproof. If Amy had guessed, however, that those lively lines—

Some folks get grey hairs,
Some folks do, some folks do,
Brooding o'er their cares—
But that's not me nor you—

had had any the most distant reference to her brother-in-law, she would certainly not have sung them; nor, indeed, did anyone apply them to Matthew.

‘Come, darling, you must get your beauty sleep,’ cried he to his wife when Barlow had departed, ‘or you will have no colour in your cheeks to-morrow. It is only Amy who gets roses thrown over the wall to her.’

‘And *you*?’ rejoined Sabey tenderly. ‘Can you not snatch a few hours’ rest before that horrid cab comes?’

‘No, my sweet; I prefer a short night to a broken one, as you well know. Your uncle and I are going to have a pipe in the study, and then I have the new poem to finish.’

‘Then he’ll sleep, for certain,’ said Amy, reassuringly.

‘Oh, but it is so sad his sitting up so; there are four long, long hours before him.’

‘I’ll sleep at the office to-morrow,’ laughed Matt. ‘Don’t fret. It is very seldom that these balls come so late in the season.’

‘Good-night, you dear old victim to Fashion,’ said Amy, as she kissed her brother.

‘Good-night, darling,’ murmured Sabey, pityingly. ‘Promise to take something before you go : there is some chicken left, and you will find sherry and soda-water on the table.’

‘It is a great thing to find a woman to love one, and you have found two, Matthew,’ sighed old Stephen, as they went downstairs. ‘You should think yourself very fortunate.’

‘I do, uncle, I do assure you—in that respect,’ answered Matthew gravely.

The ‘study’ was an underground room beneath the parlour, lined with books, and also so littered with them that it was difficult to move across the floor. They lay on the table, too, along with the sherry and soda Sabey’s forethought had provided ; and were indeed the only ornaments of the apartment, unless a something in one corner covered with a white cloth, and looking like a baby’s coffin, was any article of *vertu*. There was also a tobacco-jar on the mantelpiece, with several pipes.

‘It was said by a great man,’ observed Uncle Stephen, filling one of these latter with Latakia, ‘that “when one is much failed” (which was his downright way of speaking of the effects of years) “one henceforward wants nothing but a cup of good wine, a good bed, one’s back to the fire, one’s face to the table, and a good deep dish;” but he had not the advantage of being acquainted with tobacco. It is the greatest comfort, save a good conscience, that old age can count upon, and while one has breath (as Amy would say) to draw. What a bright creature that girl is: I never saw one of her sex with such a sense of humour. I hope Barlow appreciates her.’

‘Well, he appreciates all he can of her,’ answered Matthew, between the puffs of his pipe. ‘I think him a good fellow, but scarcely worthy of her. Even the best of good fellows would hardly be that.’

‘That’s true,’ assented the old man; ‘yet she loves him.’

‘He loves *her* at all events, and she does her best to reciprocate his affection.’

‘That is to say,’ continued Uncle Stephen, ‘it will all be right unless she meets with somebody in the mean time—that is, before marriage—who is more suitable.’

‘Which is not very likely in Cavendish Grove,’ answered Matt, laughing. ‘Moreover, having once passed her word, Amy would not give Barlow up for any other man with the virtues of Aristides and the riches of Croesus.’

‘No ; but if she once liked the other man better, she would marry neither of them. She is just the sort of girl to sacrifice herself to a sentiment.’

‘And you are just the sort of man,’ thought Matthew to himself ; ‘and, indeed, I believe you have done it.’ But he said nothing.

‘It is curious,’ resumed Uncle Stephen, ‘how love dies out of us when we are very old. Our poor attachments then become those of circumstance, which the world takes

for caprice. As passion departs, instinct reasserts itself, as it does in childhood, and the words "near" and "dear" become almost synonyms. That is why old men so often leave their money to their housekeepers. I should not care a farthing for you and the girls, Matt (for Sabey will be always a girl), if we didn't all live under the same roof.'

'Well, uncle,' answered Matthew, smiling, 'since the fact is so satisfactory, we will not dispute about the cause. But you are not a very old man—in the sense in which you speak of age—and you never will be, though you should live to be a hundred.'

'The truth is, nevertheless, Matt,' answered the other gravely, 'that I do discover in myself certain indications of old age. (Tell it, I prithee, to nobody, but let it be kept very close between us two.) For I find wine of a better relish than formerly I was wont to do, and withal I have a more dreadful apprehension than I ever heretofore have had of lighting on bad wine.'

'The voice is the voice of Esau,' answered

Matthew, gravely, 'but the thoughts are the thoughts of Jacob.'

'Perhaps I am not quite sure myself,' admitted the other. 'When you yourself grow very old, you will probably use—involuntarily—the language of mathematics.'

A flush passed quickly over the young man's face.

'If so, I shall be in my second childhood indeed, uncle. While I retain my reason, it will warn me to let mathematics alone.'

'And yet they have been useful to you, Matt.'

'No doubt. They have helped to gain me my present means of livelihood. On the other hand, they have been the cause—or rather they have made me the cause—of very serious loss to others.'

'Tut, tut; not a word of that, an you love me. I had forgotten it myself, or I should have avoided all allusion to the subject. That is one of the few advantages of my time of life. I remember the quarrel with my brother in the garden over an apple—as far

back almost as the other apple story—but I remember nothing of our falling out over the division of our patrimony a quarter of a century afterwards. In memory I am a boy again: perhaps it is the preparation for the great day of account which so nearly awaits me. One is set to study the old ledgers.'

'I find I am sometimes set to study them also, Uncle Stephen.'

'Are you? Then that is not right. The past is for old men, Matt; the present and the future are for youth. "Be sanguine; take short views; and trust in God," is the motto for all men in active life—I like to leave my company with a moral aphorism, since an epigram is now beyond me; and there goes twelve o'clock. You, too, my lad, had better be off to bed.'

'There is my lady's ball to-night, uncle.'

'To be sure; I had forgotten that, and yet you would persuade me I am not an old man.'

There was a tinge of unaccustomed bit-

terness in his tone as he said that ; but his wonted smile returned to him as he shook his nephew's hand and bade him good-night.

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CHAPTER IV.

MADGE.

WE have said that in a corner of the room in which Matthew Helston was now left alone there stood a something covered with a white cloth which looked like a child's coffin. It was not so in reality, yet it was, in a sense, the grave of a parent's hope. Matthew now rose and lifted the cloth, disclosing the model of a six-wheeled locomotive. It was a neat and beautiful engine, perfect, even to the professional eye, in all its parts and fittings; but it was not a steam-engine. There were certain novel appliances connected with it—not wings, but valves, which opened and closed somewhat like wings, and by aid of which, in connection with internal mechanism, the external air was constituted the motive-power. It was not

what is known as the pneumatic system, though it was undoubtedly an application of it, and though Uncle Stephen had ascribed his nephew's depression, when it failed, to 'pneumonia.' For, to confess the truth, 'Magdeburg'—for that such was its name the inscription which runs along its side in raised and shining metal, just as though it were a real engine, informs us—was not a success. Time was when great hopes had been entertained of it, when it was familiarly and even affectionately termed 'Mag,' and even 'Madge,' by the members of the little household in Cavendish Grove; and when the author of its being had been 'wrapped up in it,' as only mothers are in their babes. Nay, as a mother pores and hangs over her dead babe, giving more of love to its inanimate dust than some men have to give to their dearest and nearest in their lifetimes, so now Matthew Helston regarded with reverent and pitiful eyes his motionless mechanical offspring. It was dead, and would never come to life, he knew; all de-

lusions were at an end, or nearly so, upon that score; but how long they had lasted, and how implicitly he had trusted in them! His face was grave and sad enough, but gentle withal; his was not the case of one whose only son has disappointed expectation, and died a ne'er-do-well; Matthew had nobody to blame for what had happened but himself; and innocent 'Madge' was still dear to him. It may seem a foolish thing to many that he should thus worship this poor idol of brass and copper; for to some, alas! the very faculty of worship is denied, and to others, toil and thought and ambition—let alone the ecstatic aspiration of leaving the world richer than we found it—are words without a meaning. But the poet, the creator, the inventor, will understand something of Matthew Helston's feelings—though not all. For Madge had not only cost him time and trouble, sleepless nights and laborious days, and his inheritance—for he had sacrificed at her shrine all that; but he had led others to believe in her divinity to their

serious cost. The very sight of 'Madge'—and he could not help thus contemplating her, though conscious of his weakness: he had reminded Sabey, in order to dispel her suspicion on that score, that he had the new poem to finish—awoke in him a host of memories. He remembered himself as a child for whom picture-books had no attractions, but whose toys were tools, boats of his own carving, magnets, pieces of old iron that he would hammer out into knives, or saws, or pikeheads; then, later on, how he loathed his school-books, save those which dealt with figures, calculations, and machinery. Everyone had said that he was a born mathematical genius, and, what was more, he had believed them. There is an idea abroad, born of a certain pestilent, half goody-goody, half look-to-the-main-chance class of literature, that the human will is omnipotent; that if we only believe in ourselves, and work hard enough, and keep our end steadily in view, we must needs attain it; in a word, that self-confidence with assiduity can, like faith,

move very mountains—which is false. It may just as well be averred that dogmatism is synonymous with truth.

Roger Helston, the lawyer of Latbury, Matthew's paternal uncle and guardian, had thought differently—though by no means philosophically—about this matter.

‘If you imagine I am going to let you be a civil engineer, as you call it,’ he said to his nephew, ‘when my own business’ (he was a country attorney in the Midlands) ‘lies ready to your hand, you are much mistaken. I am not the man to pay three hundred pounds of premium in order that you may lie on your back and hold a tallow candle while another man is hammering nails into a ship’s bottom.’ Such was his view of the advantages of education in the practical mathematics. ‘Nor am I going to leave my money—though you *are* my brother’s son—to one who will waste it in researches after the perpetual motion or the philosopher’s stone. You may just as well take to Poetry at once, and—and—hang yourself.’

Matthew only hung his head at this, and affected submission. Nay, he did submit, after a fashion, and pursued his legal studies, against the grain, till the time came for his being articled—when another battle royal took place. Madge was then something more than in embryo, and destined to revolutionise science, as well as considerably to annihilate time and space. But Roger Helston did not believe in her.

‘That model of yours, my lad,’ said he, not unkindly, but with that positiveness (far beyond anything dreamt of by M. Auguste Comte) which belongs to a long but somewhat dense head, and the consciousness of power over the purse-strings, ‘would be your ruin if I let you have your own way. There was something else you set your heart on a while ago, I am given to understand, which has turned out contrary to expectation.’ The young man grew scarlet.

‘There is no need to dwell upon it,’ continued Uncle Roger, ‘since you have found your mistake out for yourself, it seems; but

I will only say that, ill-judged as your conduct was in that case, no worse harm could have come to you than may accrue from your misplaced love of cogs and wheels. And look you,' here he struck his hand upon the table, 'I will have none of them in my office. The law does not brook a divided allegiance. I know which way your wishes run, of course : and you are free to act upon them. Your Uncle Stephen, as I hear, has been helping to make a fool of you by praising your mathematical talents ; I am not sure that his praise is worth much ; he is in no better case now, at all events, than he was when he came into the world near three-quarters of a century ago, which doesn't look well for his gumption ; but if you choose to take your pigs to that market, take them. Only remember that, in that event, this door is closed to you for good and all.'

And Uncle Roger buttoned his breeches pockets.

In this case too, though the struggle had been sharper within him than on the last

occasion, Matthew Helston had given in. But though he did not take his cogs and wheels to his desk in a material sense, he took them with him in his head, where they clicked and whirled to the great detriment of his legal studies; while all his leisure time was given to the development and perfection of Madge—till she found a rival, not in Themis, but in Isabel Thurlow.

This young lady was the daughter of a neighbouring clergyman, the possessor of a good living, and a great social favourite in the county, but who had the bad taste, when he wanted legal advice, to apply to another solicitor than Mr. Roger Helston. This was wormwood to that gentleman, and in consequence he rather encouraged his nephew's attentions to Miss Thurlow than otherwise—because they were displeasing to her father. Roger Helston was as much of a radical as a country attorney who has dealings with the landed aristocracy dares to be; and he asked himself (in private) who was Canon Thurlow of Tarlton that he should set himself up, and

despise young Matthew, the nephew of as good a man as himself, and a very much 'warmer' one; and who had, among other valuable effects, the next presentation to Tarlton Rectory in his strong-box. Mr. Thurlow died very suddenly, and this piece of property became unexpectedly valuable; but the canon himself, who had lived like a wealthy member of the church militant (old Roger said, 'like a fighting-cock'), left little beside his two pretty daughters behind him.

This behaviour—in one, too, who had given himself such airs of superiority—was greatly resented by the attorney, who made it a text to preach from against pride, extravagance, and that conduct which is unfavourably compared in Holy Writ with that of the infidel; and he did so purposely in his nephew's presence. Matthew held his tongue till from abuse of the dead rector his uncle slid into expressions of contemptuous pity for those whom he had left well-nigh destitute; when he quietly observed, 'You

must please to remember, uncle, that Sabey Thurlow has promised to be my wife.'

Then ensued the Deluge. Did Matthew think, because two negatives made in some tongues an affirmative, that two paupers by uniting in marriage could make a subsistence? He railed, in fact, against his nephew with all the vehemence inspired by the knowledge of being in the wrong, and the determination to have his own way.

'When you thought Mr. Thurlow was a rich man, uncle,' was Matthew's calm reply, 'you consented to my wooing his daughter; and now that I have won her, is it possible that, because he has turned out to be poor, you would have me break my word?'

A question not to be answered categorically, and which only added fuel to flame.

'Don't talk to me, sir, about your word,' he broke forth; and then, with some want of consistency, 'if you do not promise me to give her up—to have nothing to do with her and beggary from this moment—you shall never darken my doors again. You have a

thousand pounds of your own, all you have in the world, invested in my business : perhaps you would like a cheque for it at once.'

'If it is quite convenient,' said Matthew, who had inherited with that inconsiderable fortune no little of the family determination, 'I will take that cheque.'

Uncle Roger seized a pen, and with trembling fingers wrote out the desired document, in exchange for his nephew's release, which was given in a very clerkly hand, for the indignation of the younger man was of the white, and not the glowing, sort.

'Now, for all I care, you might have married the other,' roared Roger Helston ; 'and, mind you, considering the way that this one has been brought up, I should not wonder if she turned out just as bad——'

'Sir !'

The old lawyer fairly quailed before the righteous indignation of his clerk and nephew ; he dropped that subject at once, and, with a

much less effective display of wrath than he had designed, bade him leave the house and never set foot in it again.

‘You may depend upon it, sir, that I never shall,’ answered Matthew, grimly, and stepped out with a firm foot into poverty and exile.

He had Sabey to comfort him, which for the present was solace enough; and he had Madge for his sheet-anchor in the unfathomed ocean of life before him.

As Roger Helston had hinted, there was another believer in Madge and Matthew beside the two Thurlow girls—who with this exception were the only members of the faith—in the person of Stephen Durham, Matthew’s maternal uncle. This gentleman had in early life succeeded to a small patrimony—producing a few hundreds a year—which, as Roger said, had become no better for keeping.

Without claim to be called a great scholar, he was a student who had given his mind to almost everything save making

money. He was by nature of a genial disposition, but for reasons of his own had remained a bachelor, a circumstance which in course of time had borne its usual fruit in rendering him somewhat reserved and cynical. He had, in fact, interested himself in little beyond his books, until a few years ago, when he had paid a visit to Latbury, and renewed his acquaintance with his sister's child for the first time since her death.

He was his only nephew, and it was pretty well understood that Mr. Durham had gone down on what was for him quite a business expedition, namely, to make up his mind whether he should make the lad his heir, or, finding him altogether contrary to his tastes, should leave his money to the 'Resuscitation Club,' or other society for republishing works which the world, if left to itself, would have very willingly let die.

To do Roger Helston justice, he had played the host to his connection by marriage as graciously as nature permitted him, and had stood in no way between the young

fellow and his expectations ; but he was secretly far from pleased that Uncle Stephen and their common nephew had cottoned to one another so cordially. He himself liked Matthew after his own fashion, and was very unwilling that he should look to anyone else for help in the world ; and the friendship that sprang up between the lad and his other relative had not a little to do, perhaps, with Roger's subsequent harsh treatment of his nephew. In gaining one friend, in short, Matthew had lost the other and by far the more powerful one ; but then he felt that the one he had gained was a friend indeed, and not to be estimated by the mere benefits he had in his power to confer upon him.

Matthew's studious and thoughtful ways, and even the slow speech and manner that in Latbury circles were held to be 'old-fashioned,' were very much to Uncle Stephen's taste ; and, in return for a genuine show of affection, which was very rare with him, he completely won the confidence of the lad. The eagerness with which he ex-

plained the merits of Madge, and the devotion that he manifested to mathematical pursuits, also greatly took his fancy ; and in the end he became a complete convert to Matthew's views. He looked on the young fellow as a born genius planted in an unkindly soil, and held out such hopes of assistance, in case he should decide to follow his own bent, as no doubt helped to make his subsequent attitude to Uncle Roger more independent. Moreover, having by a fortunate chance met the two Miss Thurlows on more than one of their shopping expeditions into Latbury, he had expressed himself in the highest terms of them. ' You can't go wrong, Matt,' he had said, ' whichever you marry ; and I only regret that the institutions of the country—in their present imperfect and undeveloped state—forbid you marrying them both.'

Uncle Stephen was a humorous old fellow, but chivalrous withal, and when, after that final quarrel between the lawyer and his nephew, the latter wrote to him at length

explaining what had happened, and his own crude plans for the future, he became his partisan at once.

‘Do not breathe the same air with your Uncle Roger,’ he wrote, ‘one moment longer than is necessary. It must be poisonous to all honest men. Keep your word with Sabey, and then bring her and Amy and Madge up to town at once. There is room in Cavendish Grove (with a little squeezing) for all four of you; and you will find a hearty welcome, at all events for the present. Miss Amy’s educational aspirations do her infinite honour, only I fear she will help to make the rising generation still more unbearable: they are already too clever by half.’

It was not Uncle Stephen’s way to act on impulse, which was the very cause perhaps of this very generous and expansive invitation; until he had met with Matthew he had never felt the paternal instinct; and, after seventy years of abstinence, his appetite was proportionately large. The time that

remained to him would necessarily be short, and he had a mind to pass it amongst loving faces: here were children to his hand, and after his own heart, and he would surround himself with them. As to the expense, he had no great superfluity of means, but he was confident—for, though he had lived in the world so long, he knew but little of it—that Matthew's talents would soon win a fortune for their possessor.

Of course the young fellow was overwhelmed with gratitude, as indeed they all were. But Sabey had grave doubts; was it wise that she should encumber her lover with a wife while he had still his way to make in the world? It was certainly not very wise, but her doubts melted like snow at the touch of his lips. She could not say 'No' when they and his only friend united in saying 'Yes.'

Amy's consent to Uncle Stephen's proposal was not so easily won.

'Mr. Durham is not *my* uncle, Sabey, though he is about to become yours. How

can I accept so great a benefit at the hands of a stranger?’

‘But you can’t live alone when I’m married to Matt,’ urged Sabey.

‘Uncle Stephen told me he only wished he had a daughter like you,’ said Matthew. ‘He called you a Sunbeam, and I have heard him complain that Cavendish Grove is “sombre.”’

‘Then, in London you will have so much better chances of attending classes, and going in for your proposed calling,’ continued Sabey.

‘But the obligation,’ persisted Amy, ‘is so excessive.’

‘Still, it is only temporary—he says, you see, “for the present”’—argued Matthew. ‘In a year or two, at most, I hope Madge will set me on my own legs; and, whether then or now, I suppose you won’t mind being under an obligation to *me*, or rather Sabey. We will offer to pay your board and lodging for you to Uncle Stephen—though I believe it will give him a fit.’

In the end, as we know, Amy was persuaded, and went, and was by this time, thanks to her own exertions, no longer a burden to her kind host. But, alas! it had not been so with her brother-in-law.

Of all Uncle Stephen's guests, Madge, the inanimate one, had turned out the most expensive. Never had a model five feet by four cost so much money. The money, of course, was not spent literally on herself; for in that case she might have been of pure gold. But she was the indirect cause of its expenditure. Her fuel, so to speak, had almost literally consisted of bank-notes. She had figured in the Patent Office, in a Law Court (unhappily not the Divorce Court), and in a Company (Limited), by no means of a convivial kind. There is no need to draw her frailties from their dread abode, in detail. Suffice it to say, that while still in embryo Uncle Stephen had advanced money on her behalf in all directions—and she was in embryo still. Her good qualities were ad-

mitted; she was one of the greatest discoveries of the age; her principle was real and of the most admirable description; she worked to perfection when there was somebody pushing her behind; but of herself she was incapable of advancing an inch, which—in a locomotive—is fatal.

It was on this Moloch of a model—so fine and shining, and in such perfect repair, that you would never have guessed it to be the wreck of his dead hopes—that Matthew Helston was now looking, after Uncle Stephen had taken his bed-candle and gone to rest. That it was a painful spectacle to him was certain, yet with his grave looks was mingled a certain piteous tenderness.

Disinter no dead regret,
Bring no Past to life again,

is excellent advice if we could but follow it; but which of us can do so? Matthew had promised to forget 'Madge,' and all about her; it was understood that he was not to lift the decent cloth that covered her and

was her pall. She was dead, he knew; nay, no life had ever been in her. And yet, what a little breath—the merest sign—of life, real life, would have sufficed for her existence! If only he could strike out that Promethean spark for her, which always glimmered in his mind, Fame and Fortune would be his; nay, more, his Faith would be justified. For though Uncle Stephen, and Amy, and even his beloved Sabey had given up all faith in Madge, he in his secret heart had still some faith, though it was indeed but as a grain of mustard-seed.

For the rest, as his uncle had hinted, his studies, his work, his knowledge, had not been utterly thrown away; by help of them, and through the strong recommendation of Mr. Durham (a man well known in scientific and archæological circles), he had obtained before his little capital of a thousand pounds had quite melted away, an appointment as confidential agent to Messrs. Star and Signet, jewellers; and at their house of business, in

Paulet Street, he gained his livelihood. The employment was distasteful to him—worse even than toiling in his Uncle Roger's office, for there were certain humiliations in connection with his present work : but at any rate it was better than eating the bread of dependence, leavened though it was by Uncle Stephen's love.

But Matthew Helston, though still in youth, was an unhappy, disappointed man ; and his mind, when not fixed upon that glimmer of the Promethean spark, was ever brooding over a vague sense of wrong.

He stands now, motionless, statue-like, lifeless save for a deep-drawn sigh or two, as he had stood often before, but rarely for so long a time, till presently from the silent street there comes a far-off rattle of wheels. He replaces the cloth over the model, and takes from a secret drawer a six-barrelled revolver. He looks to it carefully, not as a sportsman at his gun, but rather as a workman at some trusty tool ; he sees that all the chambers are, as he always leaves them,

loaded, and that none of the caps are missing. Then he places it in an inner pocket, and puts on a great-coat ; for he is summoned forth, and the dawn is breaking, and the air is chill.

CHAPTER V.

MATTHEW HELSTON'S ERRAND.

WHEN ladies of distinction, especially in the way of pecuniary endowment, are married nowadays, one is irresistibly reminded of certain lines by dear Leigh Hunt :

Have you seen an heiress
In her jewels mounted,
That her wealth and she seemed one,
And she could be counted ?

So much more fuss is made about the jewels than about the bride ! Moreover, when she goes to her cousin the Marquis's hereditary castle for her honeymoon—which she generally does in preference to any of the stately halls she possesses of her own—she is closely followed by a select band of London burglars, who, sooner or later, steal her jewels.

This is so much a matter of course, that

I am told the incident has now its regular record in certain memoranda which of old had their place in Family Bibles: 'Augusta Wilhelmina: born March 16; married May 1; diamonds abstracted May 14,' &c. It may be mere rumour as to the date being thus recorded, but at all events the diamonds go the way I have described. The only way to avoid it is to keep them in an iron safe weighing forty tons or so, and requiring a special train for its conveyance, when the following circumstances take place. The poor thieves come down after the swag, and by immense subtlety and great physical activity obtain an entrance into the bridal chamber at dinner-time; they work like horses and in the most scientific manner for four hours, and are found completely exhausted and covered with iron-mould by the lady's maid at eleven P.M., when they are given into the hands of the police. The iron-safe plan, in short, answers admirably in the Marquis's castle, where the walls are sixteen feet thick, and the floors in proportion; but

when the heiress comes to town, it is impracticable : what first floor in London will carry an iron safe weighing forty tons—not to mention the precious stones inside it ? There are then but two courses open to her. 1. She may make up her mind to lose her jewels. Or 2. She may send them to her jeweller to keep for her. Most heiresses adopt the latter course. They appear at the Palace Ball in a blaze of diamonds, and on their return home consign them to a gentleman-in-waiting from Messrs. Pearl and Garnet, who gives his receipt for the same, and takes them off in a cab, to place them in the Firm's strong box.

It was on an embassy of this kind that Matthew Helston was now starting in a Hansom cab from Cavendish Grove, armed in the manner that has been described, and at so untimely an hour. He was about to be placed in temporary possession of certain diamonds as well known in the fashionable world (for everybody who *is* anybody has certainly heard of 'the Pargiter *parure*') as

Goodwood race-course, and which were worth—well, no one knew how much. It is said that things are worth what they will fetch, in which case a retriever should be invaluable; but probate duty as on 25,000*l.* had been paid upon them by their present possessor. Some crowned heads doubtless possessed finer ones, though it was the opinion of Mr. Signet (of the great firm of Star and Signet) that all are not diamonds that glitter upon royal brows; that Eastern monarchs, in particular, would be very unwise to endeavour to realise their hereditary jewels at the pawnbroker's, and that *they know it*. This, however, is a trade secret; and besides, the jewels with which our story concerns itself had never been farther east than Whitechapel. It was there that the late Mr. Ingot—Kensington Ingot, he was called, because of the pecuniary accommodation he had occasionally afforded to a certain eminent personage—had had his modest abode, till he suddenly blossomed into the millionaire. It was said that he had taken

the diamonds instead of specie payment from a certain monarch in the neighbourhood of the Mediterranean Sea, who had got into debt from a patriotic weakness for more iron-clads than he could either man or pay for, and that, never being able to dispose of them save at a dead loss, Mr. Ingot had 'stuck to them,' and settled them on his only daughter.

While this lady was yet 'fancy free,' or at all events had not indulged her fancy by marrying anybody, there were persons so ill-mannered as to call her 'Miss Kilmansegg,' which, as her father said (though it was doubtful whether he had ever read that famous poem), they 'didn't ought' to have done. For, unlike Hood's heroine, she possessed the usual number of legs, and was by no means a ninny. So far from marrying a nondescript foreign nobleman, she had taken to herself for husband that well-known English gentleman and patron of sport, Mr. Charles Pargiter. He was a handsome young fellow of good family, and though people

said he married her for her money, we shall not repeat such a scandal. Doubtless he would not have wedded her as a mere virgin of forty-six without a penny; but let us charitably suppose his motives were mixed. She was not exactly handsome, from the circumstance that nature had originally intended her (as I believe) for a horse, and only changed its views just in time—where the chin began. Her nose, which she had inherited along with so much else, was tremendous; and when excited she would snort in an undeniably equine manner. Her own impression was that she had the Austrian or Hapsburg nose: it may be so, but in that case the Hapsburgs might congratulate themselves on having got rid of it. Heiress though she was, she thought less of wealth than of good blood and long descent. No sooner was she married than she began to move heaven and earth to procure a title for her husband, for which, to say the truth, he was himself so little desirous that he is said to have used some very strong language

upon finding himself one morning, thanks to his wife's unremitting exertions, and her influence in a certain borough, Sir Charles Pargiter.

Her ladyship, however, was delighted; nothing (unless it had been a higher title) could have given her such genuine pleasure; from that moment, as she confessed to her intimates, the real troubles of life were over; and she should never have cause to know what anxiety was—if it were not for her diamonds.

Her cares for the safety of these precious jewels consumed her. Into the country she never took them; no iron safe was safe enough for their custody, in her opinion; and in London the proud consciousness that, when attired in them, she was wearing a thousand pounds per annum for ever, was almost negated by the knowledge that a great many persons were desirous of securing that income, and that to possess themselves of her diamonds would be the shortest way it. She was not afraid of their being

snatched off her ears and neck, and appropriated by force; but if they lay in her jewel-case at home in Moor Street, even for an hour—that is, if Matthew Helston was early when he brought them, or late in fetching them away—she became a prey to hideous apprehensions, for which Matthew's receipt, on behalf of Messrs. Star and Signet, was the only balm. From that moment she ceased to be responsible, and did not care what happened to them—or to Matthew.

It was not, of course, to be expected that a lady in her position *should* care what became of the 'person' from Star and Signet when once removed from her presence; but her obvious indifference about the matter galled him. I am ready to admit that there is something—perhaps one-tenth of the force ascribed to it—in Heredity; and it is possible that some of the radical blood in old Roger Helston's veins had found its way into those of his nephew. Anyhow, Matthew entertained certain pestilent notions concerning equality—or superiority.—and in his heart of

hearts thought himself quite as good as her ladyship—or better. That was his thought, whereas, as our Lancashire friends say, ‘*her* thought was different.’ He was in her sight a mere machine, a self-acting sort of safe for jewel keeping; and if not made of iron, of something that didn’t suffer from cold or hunger, or the being kept up till five o’clock in the morning. Her ladyship herself, however, sat up as late (though she had not to be at *her* desk punctually at 10 A.M.); and what will settle the matter of Matthew’s grievances in this matter at once to most minds—he was paid for it. The custody of her jewels cost Lady Pargiter at least 200*l.* per annum, so far as Star and Signet were concerned—in whose possession, by the by, they remained nine-tenths of the year; and out of this Matthew received something in addition to his ordinary salary for this strange sort of night-work. When, however, you considered the enormous responsibility of the charge, and the inconvenience and unhealthiness of the duties it involved, it was but

small pay (though he did not feel justified, after poor Madge's failure, in refusing it); and then, as we have hinted, it was accompanied by what seemed to him to be humiliations. Matthew was proud in his way, though the fact was difficult to explain. It was not of his birth (though he was far better born than Lady Pargiter), nor of his talents, for they might as well (and better) have been in a napkin for what they had done for him; it was, in fact, from the circumstance that Sabey loved him. For, that being the case (not to mention the esteem in which he was held by Amy and Uncle Stephen), it was plain he could not be a worthless fellow. It was, therefore, a slight upon his wife's judgment—and almost upon herself—that he should be treated 'like dirt' by anybody. I dare say his deplorable social views also tended to what he doubtless considered to be a source of self-respect, but which (as will be perceived) was mere baseless pretension; and it may be added, in further excuse, that disappointment often makes its victims mor-

bid. But it was certain that he held Lady Pargiter in great disfavour, and that with so much superfluity of dislike that he even hated himself while dancing attendance upon her in Moor Street. The very jewels of which he was on these occasions the unwilling custodian became baneful in his eyes, but at the same time exercised over him the strangest fascination. While engaged in this service they monopolised his thoughts to the exclusion of Madge herself, and even at other times (which she now never did) would often form the subject of his talk. Mr. Signet, for some reason of his own, which he did not choose to explain, but which I have reason to believe was well founded, objected to this. 'I wish, Mr. Helston, you would not let your mind run so much upon those Pargiter diamonds,' he would sometimes say. 'When you have brought them home, and put them in our strong box, please to remember that they are neither yours nor mine, and have done with them.'

It was perhaps only natural that the sense

of going about with 25,000*l.* in his pocket should be somewhat oppressive to Matthew ; for if even Lady Pargiter felt it, how much more was it likely to affect (by the mere sense of contrast) a man so poor as he.

But it was not only the consciousness of their value which thus affected him ; they seemed absolutely to exercise over him a maleficent influence such as the opal, and not the diamond, is fabled to do. He kept this morbid feeling to himself, of course—indeed, he was not only ashamed but afraid of it ; for being quite convinced of its baselessness (whenever he reasoned with himself about it), he felt that the possession of it argued something wrong in his own mental economy, which he was quite aware his hopes and fears in connection with Madge had strained to the uttermost. Doubtless the sense of being the unwilling slave of this inanimate object, just as the genius in Aladdin was the slave of the ring, invested it with a certain mysterious power. If it had been even a

dumb creature, but with life in it, his position with respect to it would have seemed to him more intelligible ; but to think that for this mere heap of stones he should be dragged from home and Sabey at so weird an hour, and exposed to degradations, not only offended his manhood but excited his imagination in rather a curious manner. The mere danger of such expeditions—though there was great danger, since the nature of his errands was no secret—did not at all affect him ; the driver of the cab (he always employed the same man) was a trusty fellow, who had come from his own part of the country, and was well known to him ; and he himself, as we have seen, always carried a revolver with ‘six men’s lives’ in it in his breast-pocket. But looked at from whatever point of view, his visits to Moor Street were paid under very unpleasant circumstances, and it was natural that he should shrink from them. It would be perhaps too much to say that the presentiment of any cata-

strophe in connection with the Pargiter diamonds was actually in his mind ; but they did oppress it in a manner that his common sense resented, and yet was unable to conquer.

CHAPTER VI.

JOHN AND HIS FARE.

IN winter a four-wheeled cab conveyed Matthew Helston to and fro upon his strange errand, but in summer and fine weather John Rutherford brought his Hansom for him, as in the present instance. Ere this vehicle reached No. 7, Matthew, whose keen ears had long been cognisant of its approach, presented himself at the gate at the bottom of the slip of garden separating the house from the road. In his mouth was a small cigar ; between his fingers was a large and very full-flavoured one, which was to be handed to 'honest John,' as his humble friend was called among his intimates.

'Good day, Master Matthew.'

It *was* day, inasmuch as the morning had already broken, but the phrase seemed to

partake somewhat of purism ; whereas Mr. Rutherford, who had been called some hard names in his time, had never yet been termed a purist. He said 'Good day,' because he had not seen his employer for some time ; on parting some hours afterwards, and when the morning of course was much further advanced, he would say 'Good night,' because he had not yet been to bed. It was after all a natural way of speaking, and will be readily understood, save by those pious but card-loving persons who wait for midnight to strike on Sunday in order that they may sit down to whist with a good conscience on a week-day morning. The term 'Master Matthew' was used because he had known his present employer from childhood, and it had of old been necessary to distinguish him from his uncle Roger.

John was a lively fellow, whose countenance life in the open air had tinged with what—if one ventured to be classical—might be termed the tints of Aurora ; but as a matter of fact the days of his youth had been

(to speak Hibernically) mostly passed in night poaching, his incorrigible addiction to which pursuit had indeed compelled him to exchange his native air for that of the metropolis. In London a devotion to spirituous drinks of all sorts had maintained the hues with which air and exercise had originally dowered him, and even intensified them. He had also a weakness for the Turf, and took such an interest in all the 'events' of the racing season—great and small—as is seldom seen save in persons of the highest fashion. It may be thought that these infirmities, taken in connection with the temptations inseparable from his position in life, might have suggested a certain unfitness for convoying 25,000*l.* worth of diamonds about London during the small hours ; but it was not so in the case of Matthew Helston. Old association perhaps prevented it, or possibly the unquenchable desire which John Rutherford displayed for talk convinced the other that there could be no real roguery in the man.

'A cigar, sir ?' he said, looking at it as

an object for the first time presented to his notice, though it was always offered to him on these occasions, and had never yet been declined. 'Well, Master Matthew, since you are so kind ; though my missus always says, "John, you've been smoking," after I takes one, which she never do when I have only had tobacker' (which was his synonym for a pipe).

He lights it from a lucifer match, held downwards under his horny palm, which it flames against as innocuously as though it were a roof of talc, while his fare takes his seat the while. This ceremony concluded, you might imagine that the Hansom would start forthwith ; but Matthew knew better.

The little window above his head is opened, and the following questions are put through it, like doles of charity (or at least of courtesy) through a buttery-hatch.

'Mrs. Matthew well, I hope, sir ?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Begging pardon for the liberty, but my missus'—his wife was from Tarlton, and well

known to Sabey—‘laid it on me special to ast if there might be any addition to the family.’

‘There might be, John,’ Matthew answers, with a smile directed to the splash-board, ‘but there is none—at least,’ he adds, either from a love of truth or from his inherent matter-of-fact habit, ‘not at present.’

‘And Miss Amy, she’s herself, I hope, sir?’

‘I believe so.’

‘And the young gent next door, sir? My missus allus lays it on me——’

‘Mr. Barlow is quite well. Drive on, John.’

As the tone of his voice grows somewhat decided, not to say impatient, by this time, John flicks his mare, who, being a bit of blood (though showing more of bone), starts off at a canter. They pass swiftly through the cool air, at present undimmed by smoke, and Matthew leans back in his favourite corner, and thinks—or alas, should we not rather say he dreams?—of Madge. If only

that valve in connection with the external air could be made to catch and close!—it does so now, after an imperfect fashion, but then the imperfection is fatal to it; you might as well talk of an ‘exhausted receiver’ that only exhausts one’s patience and *not* air—if it only *could*, then no more dancing attendance upon heartless ladies, no more sitting in hateful counting-houses, no more submissive ‘Yesses’ wrung from the lips by a hard task-master when all one’s soul cries ‘No;’ no more narrow means for the present; no more carking cares for the future; no more——

‘Well, what is it, John?’

Nothing has been said, but a slant of light from above, and the consciousness of a draught, inform him that the trapdoor has been again opened.

‘Beg your pardon, Master Matthew, but I quite forgot to ast after your uncle Stephen.’

‘He is quite well. All the family are well, thank you.’

‘Well, that’s something to be thankful for, ain’t it, sir? As I says to my missus,

what a blessin' it is to think as all our family is allus quite well—no measles, no thrush, no glanders, no nothing ever the matter with them—because we haven't got none.'

The trapdoor was here shut down, but from certain stertorous noises that found their way through the roof of the cab, it was plain that Mr. John Rutherford appreciated a joke, or, at all events, a joke of his own making.

The trees and gardens, which had heretofore sparsely lined the way, now grew rarer and rarer, and were succeeded by unbroken lines of street. The dawn seemed to lose its beauty, though its sublime silence still reigned, broken only by the dull creaking of an occasional market cart, full of country produce, which they passed upon its way to Covent Garden. To these Mr. Rutherford would shout, 'Hi, hi!' in the loud, tumultuous way peculiar to stage rabble and the occupants of fire-engines, whereupon the affrighted drivers would wake from sleep, and, drawing up close to the kerbstone, stare out with blinking eyes from beneath their tilts, and swear at

the unconscious Helston, once more with Madge.

John knew that nothing short of being addressed by name would rouse his fare from his contemplations, and he indulged his love of excitement with perfect impunity. When there were no market carts, he would again resort to conversation.

‘Begging your parding, Master Matthew, but perhaps you have not heard of Sir Charles’s luck?’

‘Do you mean Sir Charles Pargiter? What about him?’

The name awoke a languid interest in Helston, though as to any luck that might have befallen the young baronet, unless his wife was dead, it could hardly concern himself.

‘Well, sir, it seems he owns Hearty Miss.’

‘Hearty Miss!’ echoed Helston. He had no idea as to what honest John meant, except that it seemed an allusion to some domestic scandal, which it certainly didn’t behove him to inquire into. ‘Oh, indeed!’

‘Yes, sir, though he gave his word to her ladyship, as I’m told, to give up all such things for good and all when she married him. She runs under another name, of course; but I’m told she’s his’n, and she’s a first-rater. Dick Dartmoor tells me she’s bound to win.’

‘*Who* is bound to win, and *what*?’ inquired Matthew with irritation.

‘Hearty Miss, sir—Sir Charles’s filly—bound to win the Hokes.’

‘Oh, I see; Artemis, a race-horse. Then Sir Charles has gone on the Turf again?’

‘Well, yes, sir, under the name of Hobson—but mum’s the word. Only Dick and me and a few more is behind the curtain, and know who Hobson is.’

Helston nodded, and threw up his chin in contemptuous disgust.

The husband of this woman, then (whose slave he was to-night), had broken his word—passed, as everyone knew, to the heiress of Kensington Ingot, before she would consent to marry him—that he would have no more

to do with racecourses. He was running his horses under an assumed name, yet not so secretly but that a cabman, a tout, and 'a few more' of the like sort were cognisant of the fact! It was no business of his (Helston's) of course; still, this wretched piece of tittle-tattle seemed to make his present errand more hateful, more degrading, even, than usual. A very morbid effect, it may be said, to be produced on any man's mind, and especially on that of a mathematician; but then so many of us (without being the least aware of it) *are* morbid. In Matthew Helston's view (which, it must be confessed, was a jaundiced one), the crowds who thronged Lady Pargiter's house in Moor Street on her rout nights, and paid court to her, and admired her diamonds, were themselves not in a wholesome state of mind. What was there in such a woman to attract anyone? what worth, apart from money's worth, did she possess? What intelligence? what virtue? what merit? Why, in the name of Heaven (or even of common sense), because she was

a money-lender's daughter, and had succeeded to his ill-got Ingot gains, should she be proud? Matthew was murmuring to himself certain lines of Sabey's favourite poet,

Why were they proud? Because red lined accounts

Were richer than the songs of Grecian years?

Why were they proud?

Why, in the name of Glory, were they proud?

when his Hansom pulled up short at her ladyship's door in Moor Street, and John Rutherford, quoting too (though only from the clown in the pantomime), exclaimed cheerfully through the trapdoor, 'Here we are again. I'm blest if she's come home, and we shall have to wait as usual, Master Matthew.'

CHAPTER VII.

MOOR STREET.

MOOR STREET, MAYFAIR, is '*that* fashionable,' as Mr. Rutherford would have called it, that it is not only free from shops or lodging-houses, but even from the intrusion of a Private Hotel. Every house is what in the auctioneers' catalogues is described as a 'Family Mansion'—grim, austere, and covered with the 'blacks' of many seasons—and though in some cases the 'family' which the 'mansion' accommodated must have been very limited, or have packed very tightly, the same air of fashion sat on the least as on the greatest. It was no doubt in one sense a quiet street; no omnibus ever approached it nearer than Piccadilly, and no organ-grinder dared to ply his dreadful trade in it, on account of the sensitive ears of its Lady

Honorias and Wilhelminas; until the afternoon, too, its inhabitants were mostly asleep, but for the rest of the day, and all through the night, it must be confessed that they made a considerable noise of their own. There was a ceaseless champing of steeds, and clatter of steps, and rolling of wheels, from three P.M. to three A.M.; and as the time drew on to the latter hour there were agonised cries for Lady So-and-So's carriage—the coachman and footman of which were both at the 'Red Posts' round the corner, which had a special license for late hours on account of this patronage of the Aristocracy.

The dulness and lifelessness of the mornings in Moor Street offered so strong a contrast with the doings of the night, that that alone would have proved the quality of its tenants; but the difference between the appearance of the place in and out of the season was still more striking. In the one case it was Vanity Fair, with the booths shining, and the bands playing, and incessant invitations (on embossed note-paper) to 'walk up'

—and in the other it was Sahara. But the very last house to roll up its carpets, and withdraw its awnings from the pavement, and go into brown holland, was Sir Charles and Lady Pargiter's. Sir Charles hated the country till the grouse-shooting began, but her ladyship hated it at all times. In town she felt that she and her diamonds showed to most advantage—and the sun and moon and stars, and all that they shone upon, were, as compared with this consideration, of very small account with her. Her passion for gaiety was unquenchable, and though her respect for fashion forbade her to appear in proper time at any place of amusement, she always reaped the curses of the bandmen by remaining to the very last. You always knew when she had reached home by the instantaneous lighting up of the first floor, which in her absence was wrapped in gloom : some said this arose from a certain frugality of disposition she had inherited from her father, but others saw the finger of pride in it; and indeed at Pargiter Park, her

country residence, a flag on the roof was raised or lowered, to indicate when she was at home or not, exactly as happens on the round tower at Windsor.

When, therefore, on the present occasion, Mr. Rutherford observed, 'I'm blessed if she's come home,' he had a good reason in the gloom of the mansion for his benediction; and he and his fare had to wait accordingly, as had often happened before.

Among other talents of 'honest John,' was the imitation of knocks at hall-doors as delivered by the menials of distinguished visitors, and his summons was so successful as generally to produce at No. 10, as now, the Hall Porter, and two canary-coloured footmen with a roll of carpet, under the impression that their master and mistress had arrived in their usual state. On perceiving their mistake, the obsequious appearance of all three at once underwent a change; the Porter retired disdainfully into his carved chair, and one of the canary-coloured footmen took himself and his majestic legs into a

neighbouring bower; while the other, with a face that betrayed his sense of the indignity, marshalled the confidential agent of Messrs. Star and Signet into what was termed her ladyship's waiting-room.

This was a small apartment, lined with tapestry, immediately contiguous to her boudoir—from which, indeed, it was separated but by a curtain, itself only partially closed. There were a couple of wax candles on the table, which feebly lit up the faded colours of the ancient needlework upon the walls; there was neither book nor flower to attract the eye, or to relieve the tedium of a watch, the length of which depended on the caprice of a woman. As he had been detained more than once long after the hour appointed for him to fetch the diamonds, Matthew was wont to bring some favourite volume with him to beguile the time, but on this occasion he had forgotten to do so. Impatient at his employer's delay, and unable (from loathing of his errand) to concentrate his thoughts upon their usual topic, he had

thrown himself into a chair, and was casting his eyes moodily about him, when they suddenly rested upon a picture standing on the floor in an obscure corner of the room. It was no doubt a new acquisition, for which no place had as yet been found in the town-house, or which was perhaps destined for Pargiter Park. Matthew took one of the candles, and stooped down to examine the picture, which at once riveted his attention in a manner scarcely to be explained by its intrinsic merits.

It was indeed, though of large size, a very moderately executed water-colour painting of a ruined Hall or Castle: a rustic bridge and river, over which at some distance towered the stately pile, occupied the foreground; there were cattle feeding in the fields, a boat tied to the river bank, and other accessories. There was neither thought nor skill in the work, but it was one of those pictures which 'look like' what they are intended for, and therefore rarely fail to satisfy the common eye. 'It is old Latbury

Hall to the life,' murmured Matthew, with a certain pathos, very unusual with him, in his tone; 'and there is the Bridge—alas! alas!' and he sighed heavily. His eyes were on the canvas, but beheld other objects than those depicted on it. When he was very young—scarcely more than a boy, indeed—that bridge had been a hallowed spot to him; and though all that hallowed it, Youth, Purity, and Love had fled, and been desecrated, the memory of the place was green and tender yet in him. For there he had met his first love, and given her his first kiss. They had parted long since: she had gone her own wilful way, as he indeed had gone his; and there was no want of loyalty to his Sabey in the sigh that broke from him. It was in pity not for himself but for another that he sighed and pondered.

So strongly was he enchained by recollection that he was quite unconscious of a sudden blaze of light in the adjoining room, as likewise of a quick step and a sweeping train upon the floor, until he saw Lady

Pargiter standing beside him in her diamonds.

She was a tall gaunt woman, and in her stiff white silk and lace and jewels looked like enough to a spectre (of the fashionable class) to have alarmed anybody ; but Matthew Helston was startled, not from fear, but from a species of shame, because he had been discovered taking what would doubtless be considered a liberty, under the last roof in all Christendom where he would wish to lie under any such imputation.

He rose quickly to his feet, and, as he put down the candle, murmured some apologetic words.

Lady Pargiter listened like a snow woman clumsily constructed by rustic hands, but upon whose neck the winter has placed its glittering jewels of frost and ice. 'You forget your place,' was what her face said ; then she added in words, 'Perhaps you will take that picture into the next room.'

Her tone was so insolent that under any other circumstances Matthew might have

hesitated to obey her ; but he felt that in so doing he was only paying a just penalty for his late indiscretion : lifting the large frame with both hands, he therefore carried it in, and was about to place it on the floor against the wall, as before, when she called out, 'Put it on the table, and hold it there a moment.'

The size of the picture was such that his face was thus completely hidden, nor could he see the other occupants of the apartment, of whom, as his ear at once informed him, there was at least one besides her ladyship.

'Oh, that's capital !' exclaimed a cheerful voice ; 'I should have known the old place anywhere.' It was fortunate for Matthew Helston that his face was hidden when he heard those words, for the voice that spoke them awakened grave and bitter memories.

'Be so good as to hold the picture straight,' exclaimed Lady Pargiter petulantly ; for it was swaying from side to side, through the tremulous passion of him who held it. 'So you really think it a good

investment, Major?' she went on in that would-be playful tone which women of fashion use to their intimates.

'Nay, I am no judge of that,' answered the other lightly; 'I only undertook to tell you whether it was like or not. It is the old Hall itself.'

'You know it well, of course?'

'Oh, perfectly; it is but a stone's-throw from the Duke's lodge-gate.'

'And you are often at the Duke's?'

This she said with a pleased purr, as though it gratified her to converse with one who was intimate with so great a man.

'I used to be,' said he, with a hidden touch of gravity that did not escape his unseen listener. 'I have not been his visitor very recently. It is not likely, however, that there are any changes in the old Ruin.'

The Major was not alluding to his Grace, but to the Hall, on the picture of which they were both still gazing.

'No one lives there, of course,' she inquired. It was a part of Lady Pargiter's



'Be so good as to hold the picture straight.'

character to feel an interest in what belonged to her—and though Latbury Hall did not do so, this counterfeit presentment of it did, which was a sufficient bond.

‘Oh, no,’ was the careless reply. ‘There is a care-taker, of course, employed by the miller who lives on the river.’

‘Why didn’t the man put in the mill?’ inquired Lady Pargiter, with an injured air; ‘it would have been a great improvement.’

‘I am not sure of that,’ answered the Major; ‘it would have drawn away one’s interest from the main subject; and, besides, it is not in sight from the point where the sketch was taken;’—there was not only a coldness in his tone, but an evident distaste for the topic. ‘Well, it is growing late, Lady Pargiter,’ he said abruptly; ‘I will wish you good night, or rather, good morning.’

‘Good night, Major. Be so good as to send my husband up to me; tell him I will only detain him for a moment, and that he may bring his cigar with him.’

In one of the mirrors with which the room was lined Matthew Helston saw the Major depart; a handsome fellow, clean-limbed and tall, and with features so regular and delicate that the long tawny moustache only just saved them from effeminacy; in reality, he was of about Helston's age, but, like him, much older in appearance; only his old looks had not been acquired by thought or care, and if they had grown upon him through disappointment, it was not the disappointment of wrecked hopes, but of satiety. For Major Frederic Lovell might almost have said (with one more famous, but of the same class) that 'he had had enough of everything,' by which he would have meant, in the main, of things that he had much better have been without, and of some of which it might have been said that it would have been better far had they perished in the using. That the lines of life of such a man and those of Matthew Helston should have crossed was strange—their planes being so different—but they had done so.

So immersed was he in sad memories roused by the late presence of this man, as things from the depths of a sluggish stream will rise long after that has gone which stirred them, that not only the steps of Sir Charles Pargiter upon the well-carpeted stairs failed to reach his ear, but the whispered, 'Hulloa, whom have we here?' which that gentleman addressed to his wife.

'It is only the person from Messrs. Star and Signet,' answered she, sharply, annoyed doubtless that anything—and especially anything of such small consequence—should have attracted her husband's attention from the object to which she would have directed it.

'Did *they* send this picture, then?' inquired he.

'No, no: what *does* it signify? How stupid you are! I want your opinion upon its merits.'

'But if I'm so stupid, what can be the value of it?' inquired Sir Charles, puffing slowly at his cigar. His eyeglass was in his

eye, but his blonde bearded face was quite destitute of any critical expression. It seldom wore any, indeed, at all, save that of careless good-nature—except when his wife annoyed him—as she was doing now. He had been summoned from his brandy and soda to look at one of the bargains on which she prided herself, but in which he himself took no sort of interest. And she had called him stupid before a stranger.

To do Lady Pargiter justice, she was unaware of having offended in the latter respect; for, though she herself was quite conscious of the presence of ‘the person from Messrs. Star and Signet’ (and even favoured him with her dislike), she had that exalted idea of good birth and good breeding in others—such as her husband—that she conceived him to be utterly indifferent to such a circumstance.

‘You are very civil, Sir Charles, I’m sure,’ said she; for she never failed to give him his brand-new title even when most displeased with him. ‘If the picture were

of some wretched racehorse, it would excite your interest soon enough, I'll warrant.'

As Sir Charles stood sideways to the table—partly, perhaps, to express his indifference to the object upon it—Matthew could see him distinctly, and when the word 'racehorse' was mentioned, he noticed the blonde face grow red, and the smooth forehead pucker into an unmistakable frown. A disciple of Lavater would perhaps have discerned in Sir Charles's features some turn of the nostril or droop of the chin which betokened determination of character; but, turn or no turn, droop or no droop, it was the fact that on certain rare occasions the good-natured baronet could be what some persons called 'nasty,' and others 'as obstinate as the devil.' Perhaps his wife saw that this was one of them, for she suddenly exclaimed with irritation, 'There, that will do: you can take away the picture.'

The colour rushed to Matthew Helston's face, and words of bitterness to his lips; but, ere he could utter them, Sir Charles

stepped forward with, 'Permit me to assist you, sir. My wife has forgotten for the moment that you are not in her service.'

Lady Pargiter's face was always red, but it changed to a deeper colour, as though a poppy should become a carnation, at her husband's words. Not a syllable did she speak, but while the two men were placing the picture against the wall, began taking off her diamonds, and putting them in the jewel-case that stood beside her. Her hands trembled as she did so, and threw their glancing rays to left and right. It was a strange scene, for the mirrored room was brilliantly lit up, and showed half-a-dozen Lady Pargiters, and a thousand sparkling crystals. When she had taken them from her ears and neck, and their flame was quenched by the lid of the jewel-case, she literally appeared to have 'gone out'—like any poor farthing candle.

'There they are, sir ; take them.'

Matthew did so, with a certain appearance of respect—which was paid, not to her,

but to her husband. She looked so cross and so uncomely, so conscious of the reproof that had been administered to her, and yet so unrepentant of the offence that had drawn it forth, that he pitied the possessor of such a wife from the bottom of his heart. In haste to relieve him from the embarrassment of his presence, quite as much as from his own desire to quit her presence, he was going away with the jewels, when the shrill voice of Lady Pargiter recalled him.

‘The receipt, Mr. Helston—where is the receipt?’ she said with vehemence.

‘It lies on your table, madam.’

He had placed it there as he took the diamonds, but in her passion she had not observed that he had done so.

‘Oh! I thought you might have made a forget of it.’

The ungraciousness of her tone was even greater than that of her words, and as she spoke them she turned her back upon Matthew.

‘One moment, Mr. Helston,’ said her

husband, stepping forward, as the other moved towards the door. 'Lady Pargiter has made a forget of something—her good manners. Permit me to apologise for her, and to beg your pardon.'

CHAPTER VIII.

GENTLEMEN OF FASHION.

THE circumstances attendant upon Matthew Helston's late visit to Moor Street were of course exceptional ones. His errands thither were always accompanied by something unpleasant, but he had never met with such rudeness from Lady Pargiter as on the occasion in question. Yet, curiously enough, his sense of humiliation as he left her door that night was not so keen as usual. In the first place, her conduct had been resented by her own husband, who, whatever his faults, had behaved like a gentleman to him and, in seeking pardon for his wife's rudeness, had obtained it, perhaps, more easily than her ladyship would have done herself; and, secondly, Matthew's mind was distracted from

his own wrongs by the consideration of those of another person.

We have hinted that in the springtime of his life he had formed an attachment which, if not a 'grande passion,' was for the time an absorbing one. Young as he was when he married, he had had time (and opportunity), before he had ever set eyes on his Sabey, to fall in love with Phœbe Mayson, the pretty daughter of the Miller of Latbury, who, living hard by the old Hall, had the privilege of showing its ruins to strangers—an office generally filled by his housekeeper, but sometimes entrusted to Phœbe herself: she was so very young, that there appeared to be no harm in it; and besides, she did not perform that office for every passer-by, but only for those who came from 'the Castle,' and were the guests of the Duke himself, her father's landlord. Matthew, of course, had not himself become acquainted with her in the capacity of cicerone. His first meeting with her was when, as a mere boy, he had obtained leave to fish in 'the

Lat,' and in throwing the fly from the mill-dam he had been caught himself. It was no wonder, and, indeed, the most likely thing in the world to happen ; for, notwithstanding his mathematical tastes, he was very impressionable and of great simplicity, and Phoebe was as fresh and beautiful as any lily-bud of the Lat. His passion was reciprocated, but not in equal measure, or rather, perhaps, the young lady had an unusual supply of the article, and distributed the surplus to other objects : for even Matthew was obliged to confess to himself that she was something of a flirt. Under any circumstances, it is probable that their attachment would have come to nothing, for she did not appreciate what was best in his character, and must in time have showed it ; but as it was, the bond was snapped in a very sad and sudden manner. She ran away with Captain Frederic Lovell, on one of his frequent visits to the Duke of Latbury, which was the reason (as Matthew was well aware when he heard him speak of it) that the former gentleman had not

gone to 'the Castle' for some time, nor was likely to go. On that very bridge portrayed in Lady Pargiter's new purchase, Matthew had on one occasion seen them together, and been seen by both ; but the Captain had only shown his white teeth in amusement, and not anger, at his boyish wrath, and Phoebe had subsequently stifled his suspicions with a reassuring kiss. At that time she had perhaps no intention of playing him false ; but his studious ways and thoughts were by no means so much to her taste as the Captain's gay and genial manners ; and then he was the guest of a Duke, and had promised to make a great lady of her. Whether he ever promised to make her his wife was doubtful to many people, but Matthew Helston had no doubt of it, and hated the man who had robbed him of his love and ruined her, as a thief and a liar. Whether Major Lovell—for he had got his 'step' since then—had recognised him or not in Lady Pargiter's boudoir, he did not know ; but he believed

he had done so, and that the recognition had caused his abrupt departure.

At all events, Matthew had recognised *him*; and the circumstance had aroused many a bitter and indignant thought within him. What a world was this wherein a perjurer and seducer was taken by the hand by a fine lady, and admitted to her friendship, while for an honest man like himself she had nothing but rudenesses and insults! Though it was on the Major rather than on Lady Pargiter that his mind was mainly dwelling, Matthew was resolved to tell Mr. Signet on the morrow that he must find some one else to do his errands in Moor Street.

When the cab took him to Paulet Street, it was already astir with early traffic; and as he let himself in at the private door, the morning light was pouring in through many a crack and cranny. If it had been mid-winter, indeed, he would have found no difficulty in finding his way about the 'show-room,' which all night long was brilliantly illuminated; through the glass door on his

left he could see the strong light shining on many a costly jewel—and so could the policeman on his beat without. For Mr. Signet adopted all the newest improvements in vogue for the preservation of his property, and one of them, as everybody knows, is to put iron bars to one's shop window, but no shutters. The precaution was considered sufficient for his ordinary stock-in-trade; but his more precious possessions were guarded in a manner peculiar to his own establishment, and after a plan invented by Matthew Helston himself. We have said that his Uncle Stephen's recommendation had gained him his post at Mr. Signet's, but this was not the whole truth; it had procured him employment with that gentleman in the first instance, but his present position of 'confidential agent' (as his employer termed it) was due (in combination, of course, with his character for trustworthiness) to his own mathematical intelligence. He had constructed for Mr. Signet a place of security for his most valuable possessions on a plan

entirely his own, and which had met with that gentleman's approval so far as any invention not his own had ever been known to meet it. For Mr. Signet was not one to squander his eulogiums, and besides, he had himself a turn for practical mathematics, and we know that 'two of a trade,' even when they chance to agree, do not form a mutual admiration society. The safe of Messrs. Star and Signet—the mere receptacle, that is, of their choicest and rarest wares, in the centre of which the Pargiter diamonds (worth all the rest together) reposed, when not adorning the person of their fair owner—was of course as solid and strong as smiths could make it. The locks were at once complicated and simple, impossible to pick, yet working as easily as a watch-key ; if not absolutely impregnable, it was a fortress to defy assault by fire or file, though applied against it for whole days together ; yet it had not inspired sufficient confidence in Mr. Signet, who had built a strong-room for it, and about the time of Matthew Helston's accepting service with

him, which happened to be coincident with the Firm's arrangement with Lady Pargiter, had begun to entertain doubts even of the strong-room.

For what satisfaction could it be to him (reflected Mr. Signet) to know that, humanly speaking, he had taken all precautions, if by some devilish craft that safe should be opened, and he should lose his jewels, and become responsible for those of her ladyship to boot! His own crude idea was, with Matthew's aid, to construct trap-doors all round the object in question, through which any would-be burglar should straightway fall and perish in some pit prepared for him.

'But suppose some poor wretch should lose his life by those very means—or even by mistake?' pleaded Matthew.

'Well, a deuced good thing, too,' was his employer's reply; 'I can't conceive a more excellent advertisement for our establishment.'

But his new assistant had conscientious scruples; a circumstance which even in a

foreman would have been indiscreet, but in a mere journeyman was little short of disgusting. Unhappily from his birth Matthew Helston had indulged himself in the luxury of a conscience, and he did not understand that in reduced circumstances that is one of the first things a man is expected to 'put down.'

A curious example of his sense of duty had happened when he was leaving Tarlton Rectory one evening for his home at Latbury. He took a short cut across the kitchen garden, where a mastiff had been let loose to check certain depredations in the melon-beds, a fact of which he was inconveniently reminded by being flung to the ground and finding the animal's teeth in his neckcloth. Though of delicate constitution, Matthew was physically strong, and after a short struggle he contrived to reverse positions with the animal, whom he got under him, and kept there until, after much calling for help, he obtained it.

The Rector, shocked at what had so nearly

been a catastrophe—for, however good for melon-stealers, the discipline had been somewhat severe upon a dinner guest—inquired why Matthew had suffered himself to be mauled by the mastiff, when he could have throttled him, as it seemed, with comparative ease.

‘The dog was only doing his duty, sir,’ replied Matthew simply.

A rejoinder which, however just, was considered by his host (who liked his ‘duty’ done *for* him whenever possible) not a little quixotic.

On the occasion of which we are speaking Mr. Signet entertained a similar view of Matthew’s scruples; but as he needed his help, he was compelled to give way to them; and his assistant had made the strong-room after his own fashion.

It was thither that Matthew now bent his way, with a lighted candle in his left hand, and his right in the neighbourhood of his revolver. For it must be recorded to his credit that, so long as the ‘Pargiter

parure' (as Mr. Signet loved to call it) was in his possession, he never lost sight of its importance, nor of the possibility of some desperate attempt being made to transfer the ownership to other hands; in particular, while the thing was in his charge, he never suffered his thoughts to wander to Madge, being well aware of her power of monopolising them.

Arrived at the strong-room door, which was of solid iron, he entered, and quickly closed it behind him. The apartment was on the ground floor, and at the back of the premises; it had no window; and no one ever entered it, save Mr. Signet, the Foreman, and himself. The safe stood almost in the centre, opposite the door, and anyone wishing to approach it would have naturally stepped straight forward. Matthew, however, stepped to the right, and kept close to the right-hand wall, exactly as if the middle of the room had been a flower garden, and had a gravel walk around it. If he had done otherwise he would have set a gong in

motion that would in an instant have brought down two shopmen who slept above, and waked half Paulet Street with its alarum : a device not so deadly as Mr. Signet's proposed pitfalls, but far more simple, and equally efficacious.

In the door of the safe was a letter lock, whispered in the house to be of the most elaborate construction, and in which Mr. Signet took especial pride, for it was his own invention. The ingenuity of this lock consisted in its not having anything to do with the safe at all ; it was merely a subtle artifice to deceive the unlicensed ' operator,' for the safe was opened with an ordinary—though quite inimitable—key. As the light of Matthew's candle fell upon its contents, it disclosed only some half-score of morocco cases, but each of which contained what was valued at a moderate fortune ; some of them belonged to the firm, which was really Mr. Signet himself (Star having been long translated to his proper firmament), but others were pledges—security for money advanced

to ladies of fashion, who were permitted to wear them as if they were their own on especial occasions, and under certain stringent conditions. In the centre was a little velvet throne, set apart for the '*Pargiter parure*,' where it reigned over the rest, by the highest title—that of superior worth, or market value.

Matthew deposited the case in its proper place, locked the safe and the door of the strong-room behind him, and then gave a great sigh of relief. It was the last time, he had made up his mind, that that incubus should ever weigh upon it. Then, with weary limbs but with a lightened heart, he stepped into his cab for home.

His adventures, however, for the night, or rather morning, were not yet over; but what was about to happen to him needs a word of preface.

Though Major Frederic Lovell had left Lady Pargiter's boudoir, as we have seen, with considerable abruptness, it was not on account of the lateness of the hour (as he had

pretended) and a virtuous desire to get to bed. As a rule, he did not care at what time he retired, though he was very particular about getting up early—that is to say, he never did it, nor even allowed himself to be called. The truth was, her ladyship's topic of conversation had been displeasing to him. The picture of old Latbury Castle had evoked certain unpleasant memories within him as it had in Matthew's case, though they were of a different kind. He had behaved badly to many a girl in his time, for which he felt little remorse; but Phoebe Mayson's case had been—and alas, as he easily guessed, was still—a very hard one. Of course he argued, and for once with some justice, that 'the girl had met him halfway,' that 'if she had not gone wrong with him, she would have done so with somebody else,' &c. &c., but there had been circumstances in this affair that made it more serious than others of a like nature. To indulge a passing passion (a fancy, as he now called it), he had outraged, in the opinion of

no less a person than the Duke of Latbury, the laws of hospitality—for Phœbe was his tenant's daughter, and the Major had been his guest when he eloped with her.—and he was an outcast from his Grace's Court in consequence. Moreover, he had loved the girl, so far as he was capable of such an emotion, and not only for her beauty: she had a sharp wit and a high spirit, which he admired even when he felt their force, as in a certain bitter hour (which he well remembered) when she had flung herself from him, not without provocation, and exchanged his scorned 'protection' for a life of still greater shame. High birth and good society, although of great value as correctives, or rather sedatives, of such morbid feelings, do not always succeed in stifling self-reproach. And though he had only lied to her as gentlemen of the highest fashion—and honour—are wont to do, his conscience pricked him.

Under these circumstances, it would have been the height of imprudence to go

to his rooms at Long's, where he might lie awake for hours with conscience for his only companion ; he had been in such straits once or twice before, and had found nothing so beneficial to his moral system—on the principle, perhaps, of counter-irritation—as a ‘flutter’ at the gaming-table ; as playing, that is, for stakes far higher than common, and much more than he could afford.

Such is the mawkish milk-and-water character of our modern social system, that it is difficult nowadays to find a gambling-house in London open after 3 A.M., and even then it must needs call itself a club. However, such a club he did know, in Jute Street, in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross, and thither he now bent his steps. It was an establishment to which, of course, he himself belonged, but it was only in part an aristocratic one ; the members of the ‘Frobisher,’ as some of themselves (who were not upon its committee) frankly acknowledged, were a ‘scratch lot.’ There were some noble lords belonging to it, but

also a good many persons who were not lords—nor even gentlemen, though perhaps they had all been reckoned such at one time. It was said of the club that certain of its members carried more about with them in their pockets than any other folks in London—and that it was all the money they had in the world. This arose from the simple circumstance that their play was high, but their credit by no means of the same altitude. There were of course little memorandums flying about in which the vowels I O U held a prominent place, but as a rule there was an indisposition to ‘just set that down, my good fellow ;’ the good fellow, not without reason, preferring generally to have the money.

There was a reading-room and a writing-room in the establishment, each about the size of the private room in a hairdresser’s shop, and not much better furnished ; but the actual necessities of life were amply provided for : there were two billiard-tables, and the card-room had accommodation for fifty persons.

At 3.30 A.M., however, the attendance at even the 'Frobisher' had begun to thin, and when Lovell entered it he found but a small company playing their very last game at unlimited loo; they had sworn that each of the previous half-dozen games should be the last, but had been overruled by the vehement opposition of a certain Captain Langton, who once held a commission in one of her Majesty's cavalry regiments, but who now levied tribute and made war upon the world without any authorisation beyond that of his own good will and pleasure. He had lost 'a hatful of money' that night, and was obstinately resolved to get it back again, not necessarily from those who had won it from him, but out of somebody; and the arrival of Lovell was secretly hailed by him with profound satisfaction. The Major was not a very frequent visitor at the 'Frobisher;' but when he did come, it was generally, as on the present occasion, with the intention of 'plunging,' and Captain Langton was just in the humour to accommodate him.

He was a short, rather thickset man of about forty years of age, with that air of jauntiness which is so bad a substitute for the liveliness of good humour, and a growing tendency to swagger : this last arose not from pride (for, to say truth, he had very little to be proud of), but from the sense of the necessity of self-assertion. He had never possessed the genial and agreeable manner that made Lovell a favourite in the club (and indeed in many other places)—and of late years ugly stories had cropped up about him, which had deepened the unfavourable impression regarding him. Men of strict honour, even of the ‘Frobisher’ kind, turned their faces from him, and declined to ‘cut in’ at the same rubber, and if Lovell had been a more frequent visitor to Jute Street, and known the man equally well, he would probably have done likewise. As it was, the Major was not displeased when Langton, rising from the table with the rest, proposed a little picquet—the stakes of which should be proportionate to the lateness of the hour : ‘ One

cannot afford to ruin one's constitution for sixpences,' as he playfully observed, though he forgot to point out that one of them—the loser—must of necessity do even worse.

The waiter, who had the appearance of a man who never slept, but was very anxious to try the experiment, here ventured to observe that the hour had arrived for closing the club; whereat the Captain damned his impudence, wheeled his chair to a picquet table, and called for cards. If he had been wise in his generation he would have spared his oath, and thrown a couple of sovereigns at the waiter's head instead; but the Captain, though liberal (in a Shakespearean sense) of speech, was chary of his sovereigns.

Without daring to reply, the waiter shuffled after one of the retreating company, who happened to be on the committee, and stated his hard case. 'Tell Captain Langton with my compliments that you have my orders to close the club,' said that gentleman promptly.

‘Much he will care about that!’ observed one of the committee-man’s companions, as they stepped into the street.

‘So much the better for the “Frobisher,”’ answered the other gravely; ‘for if he breaks a rule we can get rid of him.’

The same idea probably occurred to the Captain himself, for, after bestowing on the waiter a choice string of vituperative epithets, he proposed to Lovell that they should go and have their game out elsewhere.

‘But where?’ said Lovell.

‘Oh, at your own rooms if you like.’ Now, Major Lovell, though willing enough to gamble with the Captain at the ‘Frobisher,’ was by no means inclined to be so familiar with him as to ask him to his hotel. ‘Or you can come to mine,’ said the Captain, perceiving the other’s hesitation.

But this again did not meet the Major’s views. He did not absolutely suspect his companion of dishonesty, but it did flash across him that he had heard queer stories of the Captain; and that with his own cards

and in his own rooms such a host might have the advantage over him at picquet.

‘No,’ said he; ‘it’s too late, my good fellow.’

The Captain’s coarse red face expressed considerable irritation. ‘It seems to me, Lovell, you are rather funky of the picquet.’

‘You are quite mistaken,’ answered the Major, coolly; ‘I am not funky of you at any game, and I want a “flutter.”’

They had put on their hats, and were standing on the doorstep in the tall and narrow street into which the sun had hardly penetrated.

‘Very good,’ said the Captain suddenly, ‘I’ll toss you for a monkey—one toss.’

‘Five Hundred Pounds is a large sum,’ answered Lovell hesitatingly.

‘There! I told you you were funky. Look here, I’ll give you 25*l.* to toss for 500*l.*,’ and he pulled out his portemonnaie. It had the former sum in it—for he produced it—but certainly not the latter.

‘Very good. If you are so keen about it as all that, I’ll take you. Shall I toss, or you?’

‘You shall toss.’

Major Lovell took a sovereign from his pocket and spun it into the air. ‘Woman!’ cried the Captain, with fervour. More than Matthew Helston’s annual income and that of his uncle to boot depended upon which side that coin should come down. It fell in the gutter slantwise. ‘Woman it is,’ cried the Captain triumphantly.

‘It is not. Hands off!’ cried the Major. ‘It is neither the one nor the other.’

There really was some doubt about it; but the Captain thought there was no doubt, and his face was a picture—a score of evil passions were crowded into it, but rage was uppermost.

‘If you don’t mean to pay——’ he began.

‘Be silent, sir!’ cried Lovell. ‘If I have lost I will pay you to-morrow morning, but I won’t take your word for it. Let us ring

the bell' (for the clubhouse door had been closed behind them), 'and ask the waiter.'

'The waiter is an ass; and, besides, he has a grudge against me,' said the Captain. 'Let us abide by the decision of the first passer-by.'

'Very good; so be it.'

At four in the morning in Jute Street (though it is a short cut from the city to the south-west portion of the town) there are not many passers-by, and the two men, with the coin between them, stood waiting for more than a minute. Then the rattle of a Hansom was heard, and as it drew near the Captain stepped into the street and held out his hand to stop the vehicle. It had a passenger inside, to whom he addressed himself with unwonted civility.

'This gentleman and I, sir, have had a little dispute, which perhaps you will have the great kindness to settle for us. It is simply whether a coin which one of us has tossed up lies with its head or tail uppermost.'

The passenger murmured something about it not being his business, and of the unusual character of such a request; but the cabman put in a word.

‘Lawk a mussy! there can be no harm now we’re going home, Master Matthew,’ he said. ‘Don’t spoil a bit of sport.’

Thus adjured, the passenger, although with some reluctance, alighted, investigated the coin, and pronounced that ‘Woman’ was uppermost.

‘Of course it is,’ cried Langton triumphantly. ‘You have lost the monkey, Lovell.’

The Major did not speak, thought doubtless, like the Parrot, he thought the more; but, strange to say, the involuntary umpire did.

‘Do I understand you to say, sir,’ he inquired gravely, ‘that you have won 500*l.* of Major Frederick Lovell?’

‘Yes, sir—less 25*l.*, I have.’

‘Then permit me to congratulate you. I am very glad to hear it.’ With which obser-

vation, which was delivered in very distinct tones, he stepped into the Hansom and was whirled away.

‘Well, that’s the rummest start I ever knew,’ exclaimed the Captain. ‘Did you hear what that fellow said, Lovell?’

‘Yes, I heard,’ answered the Major, with an unpleasant laugh. ‘He’s a man who owes me a grudge, or thinks he does, poor devil.’

‘An injured husband, eh?’

‘Well, yes; something of the kind,’ answered the other carelessly. ‘He’s not a gentleman, of course, or he could have had his remedy. He’s a jeweller’s clerk; I saw him at Lady Pargiter’s just now; he came to take away her diamonds; he does it every night after she has worn them.’

‘What, *the* diamonds—the Twenty-five Thousand Pounders!’

‘Yes, the same. Good night. I will send you my cheque to-morrow morning.’ And the Major strolled away with a careless air that was by no means the exponent of his genuine feelings.

‘This will recoup me for that infernal run of bad luck to-night,’ mused the Captain; ‘but it leaves me hardly better than I was before—and that was in Queer Street. So the Pargiter diamonds are carried away every night after her ladyship wears them! I have seen the face of that cabman on a racecourse somewhere; he’s a pal of my tout’s, Dick Dartmoor. I’ll make a note of that—and he entered something in his pocket-book.

If anyone had closely followed Captain Langton, as he walked slowly to his lodgings that morning in Golden Square, he would have heard him murmur to himself at intervals—rolling the sentence like a sweet morsel under the tongue—‘Twenty-five Thousand Pounds! Twenty-five Thousand!’

CHAPTER IX.

MR. SIGNET AND HIS ASSISTANT.

ALTHOUGH his errand to Moor Street had taken so large a cantle out of his night's rest, Matthew Helston was in his place in Paulet Street at his usual hour next morning. It was his habit, no matter how small a modicum of sleep he had, so to be ; not so much from a sense of duty as from a certain obstinacy of disposition which forbad him to give way to physical weakness ; and his employer was not the man to suggest a less rigid punctuality. Though Amy had spoken of his desk, and perhaps imagined him sitting before one, with huge ledgers upon it, his duty was not that of a clerk, nor did the room he occupied in the least resemble a mercantile office. It was more like a moderate-sized drawing-room, except that the

chairs (though handsome ones) were few in number, and that nobody, however rich or however vulgar, ever yet had so many articles of *vertu* crowded together in one apartment. There were clocks enough to keep time for all eternity; their monotonous and ceaseless ticking would have driven a man of more sensitive organisation into a lunatic asylum, while every five minutes or so (for they were by no means synchronous) there would be a whirr of warning, followed by the striking of the hour, notified in a score of ways, from the chime of a cathedral down to a peal of fairy bells. The measured dignity of one pendulum could be only equalled by the march of a drum major at the head of his regiment, while the hurried alacrity of another suggested nothing short of a fire-engine at full gallop, or of a trained bullfinch drawing water under the eye of its teacher. Not that Messrs. Star and Signet 'went in' for clocks and watches at all as recorders of time: that office in them being quite subsidiary to their external appearance.

It was the precious stones or metal of which they were composed, or their artistic beauty, or their quaint mechanical arrangement, which constituted their value. The great clock at Strasbourg could boast of no more numerous *dramatis personæ* than some of these timepieces; only, instead of the Apostles, the Muses and the Graces were made (by a species of poetical justice) to take note of the hours which in their lifetimes they had frittered away. Nor was it in clocks only that the mechanical ingenuity of Mr. Signet's wares was made apparent. On the table at which Matthew Helston sat were arranged a multitude of costly toys, from finger-rings to snuff-boxes, each of which vied with the other in producing the unexpected and the anomalous. Out of one would spring a Danae pursued by a shower of golden coins sufficient to have overcome the virtue of Diana; and from another would fly, with chirp and twitter, a bird of paradise, all sapphires and diamonds, who had stolen her song from the nightin-

gale. It was to these base uses (as he thought them)—the teaching of coral cocks to crow and sapphire cuckoos to prate of spring—that Matthew Helston's mechanical skill was now addressed ; and while engaged in these strange conversions, it really seemed as though his own appearance had undergone in part a kindred metamorphosis, and 'suffered a sea change,' for in his right eye was stuck a mounted microscope, which caused it greatly to resemble the projecting orbs peculiar to the crustaceans. Of this contrivance it was Matthew's weakness to be excessively ashamed, and at the sound of a coming footstep, even though it were that of his employer, he would drop it hastily, and apply himself to some other employment. Mr. Signet always made a point of looking in upon him after any of his expeditions to Moor Street, perhaps to save himself the trouble of going to the strong-room, since to see Matthew safe and sound was a guarantee of the safety of the *parure*—and he did so on the present occasion. He was a short,

dark-complexioned man of about fifty years of age, with beady, bat-like eyes (which had, however, detected many a false stone in their time), and a certain unctuousness of manner which would dry up with startling suddenness on occasion—as when any of his material interests were menaced—and presently gush forth anew as if nothing had happened.

‘Well, Mr. Helston, how goes it?’ This did not refer to the mechanism of the bird of paradise which Matthew just then happened to have in hand, nor to that gentleman’s state of health, about which Mr. Signet cared a great deal less, but was a covert inquiry after the safety of the diamonds. ‘You had a fine night for your errand.’

‘A fine morning, rather, sir,’ returned Matthew, gravely. He not a little resented the notion, which his employer undoubtedly intended to convey, that to sit up till 5 o’clock A.M. was, after all, not so very late a vigil, and he was also leading up to the expression of that determination he had formed

to wash his hands of the 'Pargiter *parure*' altogether.

'Ah, her ladyship was latish, was she?' returned Mr. Signet, in a careless tone, but with a sudden fixity in his beady eyes; he saw that the shoe was pinching somewhere (though he mistook where it pinched), and it was so important to him that this man should continue to wear the shoe. 'These sort of people who turn night into day think but little of us poor toilers who have to burn both ends of the candle. At the same time, it is something, mind you, to be admitted to such terms of—I may say intimacy—with a person of Lady Pargiter's position: to be received in her boudoir all alone and at ever so much o'clock at night; 'pon my life, I wonder Sir Charles ain't jealous.' And Mr. Signet smiled in a manner which he intended to be wicked, but which was so very little like it, that one may reasonably hope that it was not set down by the recording angel to his discredit.

'It is an honour, sir, that I do not at all

appreciate,' observed Matthew, frigidly, 'and indeed I was about to say——'

'Stop,' cried Mr. Signet, holding up both his hands, as if he had been a signalman, and Matthew an engine on the wrong line. 'I can see it all. I know what you are going to say, as though you had said it. That woman has been rude to you. My dear sir, accept my profoundest sympathies. But she is rude to everyone. She is the most cantankerous and contemptible old harridan. I knew her as Miss Ingot—the usurer's daughter; and then she was bad enough; but as the Scripture says, "*An odious woman when she is married*" is ten times more obnoxious than she was before. I often almost lose my patience with her myself—though of course one is obliged to be civil.' This last confession was drawn forth by an involuntary smile which appeared on Matthew's face, evoked by the recollection of his chief's obsequious and urbane behaviour to her ladyship whenever she visited his establishment, and notwithstanding that she

always strove to cheapen things. 'Life, my dear sir,' he went on, 'is made up of compromises. What I think of Lady Pargiter is that she has no manners and no conscience; an utterly worthless woman, who ought to be put in a bag and drowned like a cat, with a very common sort of stone round her neck: but it would be injudicious—most injudicious—to tell her so. Are such people, then, you will say, to be insolent to me—or even to you—with impunity? Well, no, they are not: I assure you—between ourselves, my dear sir—I generally contrive to charge it to them in the bill.'

'I am truly glad to hear it, sir,' said Matthew, smiling in spite of himself. 'But in my case, you see, I have no means of making reprisals. And her conduct is sometimes most offensive. She accused me this morning of forgetting to leave her our receipt.'

'You never forget to take hers, I do hope,' interrupted Mr. Signet, energetically.

'Certainly not, sir. I was about to say

that, if I had tried to steal her diamonds, her manner could not have been more outrageous.'

'Dear me !' exclaimed Mr. Signet, aghast at the bare idea of such a catastrophe: 'I beg you won't talk like that; Mr. Helston. If she did really think—I mean, if so ridiculous a supposition as your having forgotten the receipt *on purpose* entered her brain—after supper, you know—she drinks like a fish, they say—well, it would not excuse her, of course, but it would be some kind of extenuation. But if you complain of the terms, they shall be raised, and you shall have the difference.'

'Indeed, Mr. Signet, I did not mean that. The pay is no doubt sufficient for the service rendered; and, as you say, some people might be even proud of the service. But for my part, I was about to say——'

'Then *don't*,' cried Mr. Signet, with sudden asperity: 'for I really cannot listen to such a thing. Look here, my dear sir—my very dear sir,' he added, sitting down by

Matthew's side, and speaking with more unctuousness even than before, "An honest woman," says the Scripture, "is above rubies;" which, however, I rather doubt: at least, I never knew one who was above taking them if she had a chance: but an honest man is even more valuable—at all events, in my profession. It is a humiliating confession for one who loves his fellow-creatures to make, but a man who can be trusted with five-and-twenty thousand pounds worth of diamonds in a hack cab at night is a deuced rare thing—*nigroque simillima cygno*, as we used to say at school: a very pretty line, by the by, and very suitable, as I have often thought—*cygno* for Signet, you know—for a motto for our own establishment. If you were to fail me in this matter—I say if you *were*, though you are the last man in the world, I feel, to desert your post—where should I find one to fill your place? You are, so to speak—like that bird of paradise in the snuff-box—unique, and I value you accordingly. Only,

and here Mr. Signet dried up again, 'you must not talk of giving up your Moor Street errands.'

'But, indeed, sir, as I was about to say——'

'Well, well, another time—I am just now full of business; indeed, I only looked in to say that, as I was passing by Cavendish Grove to-morrow afternoon, I would do myself the pleasure to make a call, if it was quite convenient, upon Mrs. Helston.'

'She will be very pleased to see you, sir. But why not come to dinner at seven? My Uncle Stephen will be delighted, I'm sure.'

'Very good; I will. He is a most worthy and learned gentleman, I hear from everybody. Then we can talk this matter over in a friendly way.'

It is probable that a call in Cavendish Grove had hardly been the prevalent idea in Mr. Signet's mind when he looked in on his assistant's labours; and, to say truth, the latter's observations had first suggested it.

It struck him that he might be able to overcome Helston's objections by the arguments of a third person, whose influence he hoped to enlist upon his own side: for Mr. Signet's experience of life was that where a man takes morbid views, and adverse to his own material interests, his wife deplores them, and would always fain win him over to the cause of common sense and pecuniary profit.

CHAPTER X.

THE PATRON'S VISIT.

THE alarm at No. 7 Cavendish Grove at the news of Mr. Signet's promised visit, which Matthew brought home with him that night, was considerable and well-nigh universal.

Sabey, naturally shy, was struck with consternation at the greatness thus thrust upon her, of entertaining her husband's employer. Matthew himself was by no means pleased that Mr. Signet, with whom his business relations were far from agreeable, should have thus invited himself as a guest, and Amy—though herself perfectly self-possessed on all occasions—had a strong foreboding that this honour to be conferred upon the family was likely to result in anything but advantage.

She pictured to herself in Mr. Signet

(from what had fallen from her brother-in-law) a purse-proud and somewhat offensive person, with whom it would be very difficult to 'get on,' and to whom Uncle Stephen might very possibly present a side of his character which was not the most attractive. For he was not, as a rule, genial to strangers, and had not, in the first instance, responded very cordially to the advances of Mr. Barlow himself. That he could be agreeable, when he chose, to everybody, and could talk with much knowledge and familiarity upon almost every topic, she was well aware: but she had also observed in him, on occasion, a certain frigidity of manner, which not only froze conversation at its very source, but with it the would-be talker's very vitals. He had, it was true, seen Mr. Signet once on the occasion of Matthew's first introduction to him, but had since maintained a silence with respect to that gentleman which was not only significant, but ominous. That, for his nephew's sake, Uncle Stephen would do his best to conciliate their visitor, she had

no doubt; but in a case where he entertained dislike or contempt, she doubted his powers to please.

There are natures so genial that they blossom even in frost and snow, but others (and these are the greater ones) require the sun of sympathy to evoke their hues and fragrance—which in its absence shrink up within themselves, and ‘close’ like the sensitive plant, ‘beneath the kisses of night.’ We may even go a little further, and admit that they have the involuntary faculty under such circumstances of making themselves uncommonly disagreeable.

In this particular instance, it is fair to say that Amy’s apprehensions were ill-founded. Stephen Durham, it was true, was not a man to ‘put himself out’—that is to say, to make the least sacrifice of independence—to please the Great Mogul, or (I fear) even the Archangel Michael, had that potentate favoured him with a personal visit; but he understood, of course, that it was important to be civil to his nephew’s

employer, and made up his mind—within limits—to be so. It fortunately never entered into his mind that Mr. Signet would venture upon patronising either him or his, or that gentleman would indeed have found himself (as Captain Langton had humorously expressed it) in Queer Street.

As a matter of fact, however, when Mr. Signet stepped into his brougham at six o'clock that afternoon, from the door of his country-house at Teddington, and gave that very insignificant direction to his coachman, 'To Cavendish Grove,' he felt 'the patron' from the summit of his crush-hat down to the sole of his patent-leather boots. To do him justice, he was not generally so foolish when going out to dinner as to wear a crush-hat (which, if certain people would only understand the fact, is meant for evening parties, and *not* for dinners), but he had an idea that his carrying that article of apparel under his arm into No. 7 would impress its tenants with the fashion and social position of the bearer. (As it turned out, it only succeeded

in embarrassing the domestic, Mary Jane, to whom he presented it as he sat down to table, to put somewhere, and who in her ignorance and alarm very nearly put it into the soup tureen.)

As it is certain that neither the width nor height of the tenements in 'The Grove' could have impressed Mr. Signet favourably, we may conclude that he arrived at his destination in the same state of proud pre-eminence as when he started; and yet, no sooner did he set foot in that little sitting-room with which we are acquainted (and which was all the drawing-room that No. 7 could boast of), than he (figuratively) fell down several pegs.

If he had known the tremors that secretly shook his fair hostess, it would have been better for his sense of dignity; but as it was, her gentle genial reception of him took him quite aback, while the sight of Amy in white muslin, and with 'one red rose in her hair' (given by we know whom), completed his discomfiture. It was not that

they were both so pretty, and dressed in such good taste, but that they had that soft yet self-possessed air with them which he had been wont to observe in his professional transactions as being peculiar only to real ladies.

When Mrs. Helston told him that it was very good of him to have come so far, and on so short an invitation, he began to wonder whether he really had been so good, though five minutes before he had not entertained a doubt of it : and when Amy called to her brother-in-law and Mr. Durham to come in from the garden (where they were lightly talking together, with scarcely a due sense of the overwhelming honour his arrival was about to confer upon them), he thought he had never heard a voice so pleasant in his whole collection of singing-birds ; for, unlike theirs, it was not a mechanical voice, but soft and clear, and instinct with a very keen intelligence.

It was to Mr. Signet's credit, of course, and a sufficient defence of him against the

imputation of gross dulness with any persons of good judgment, that he could appreciate such delicate touches : but the fact was, his nature was by no means base, though it had undoubtedly contracted much alloy through living 'on Tom Tiddler's ground,' as Amy had called it, and the practice of persuading persons of the highest fashion to buy what they did not want and could not afford.

Nor did the venerable appearance of Uncle Stephen, combined with a certain courtly gravity of manner which he displayed upon this occasion, fail to make its impression on Mr. Signet ; he knew that Mr. Durham was a man of mark, and had graciously intended to meet him, at his own table, on equal terms ; but he soon perceived that, if there was to be any patronage, it must needs be the other way, and so very wisely discarded the idea of it altogether.

The chief obstacle to complete harmony in the little party lay, to say truth, in Matthew himself, who was certainly not at his ease, and, after a few not very successful.

attempts at conversation, left the entertainment of his respected employer in the more skilful hands of his uncle and the ladies. It is fair to say that their efforts were not a little assisted by the circumstances of the case; the beauty of the evening, and the vicinity of the little garden, into which they all descended—an incident which, slight as it was, served to take off the hard edge of convention, and afforded the visitor—in the fairy fountain and the miniature fernery it sprinkled with its spray—topics of conversation somewhat less insipid than the weather.

At all events, the little party 'got on' with the new arrival beyond all expectation, and by the time they were summoned in to dinner (which I fear was a little late), the guest would have felt quite at home, but that in offering his arm to Mrs. Helston he forgot that it held his crush-hat, and dropped it into the fountain among the gold-fish, to his (and their) extreme confusion.

The gold-fish, however, suggested the precious metals, and from that moment the

conversation never languished ; for, far from 'sinking the shop,' Mr. Signet was never weary of descanting upon gems and gold and jewels, about which (until that evening) he flattered himself that he had a monopoly of information almost as precious as the topic itself.

'Speaking of diamonds,' said Amy, after some talk upon that 'sparkling topic, 'you can of course answer a question, Mr. Signet, that was put to me to-day by one of my pupils.'

'Your pupils?'

'Yes, I am a governess' (Mr. Signet stared with as much surprise as if she had said 'I am a Mormon ;' yet, strange to say, the confession did not humiliate his fair neighbour in his eyes ; a crude idea was already beginning to form itself in his mind which made the fact rather agreeable to him than otherwise). 'My pupils expect me to be a cyclopædia of learning,' she went on, 'and yet I could not tell them what a rose diamond was. I am ashamed to say I

thought of saying, "it is a diamond of the same colour as a rose;" that would have been very wrong, would it not?'

'It would have been incorrect, Miss Thurlow,' said Mr. Signet, in a tone in which pomposity (from the consciousness of knowledge) and gentleness (from his admiration of his neighbour's charms) were strangely mingled. 'The rose diamond is a hemisphere covered with small facets, so as somewhat to resemble that flower.'

'An invention attributed to Cardinal Mazarin,' observed Uncle Stephen, 'but, as I dare say Mr. Signet will tell us, which has a more ancient origin.'

'Yes, indeed, sir,' returned the jeweller, with more, however, of adhesion to the other's opinion than confidence in his own. 'I think Italy has the precedence of France in this matter.'

'No doubt; and India was still earlier in the field,' assented Uncle Stephen; 'Tavernier describes the majority of Aurungzeb's diamonds as being rose-cut.'

‘To be sure, to be sure,’ said Mr. Signet, who, however, had never heard of Aurungzeb’s name—at all events, in that number of syllables.

‘Then, there was another question which puzzled me,’ resumed Amy; ‘as to the exact description of a touchstone.’

‘It is a black jasper,’ observed the jeweller; ‘the best specimens come from India.’

‘But its attributes?’ continued Amy. ‘Is it true that by rubbing any ore upon it, its nature can be distinguished?’

‘Well, well, no; that is what one may call legendary: a little of the philosopher’s stone—eh, Mr. Durham?’ for he saw that Uncle Stephen’s eye had significance in it.

‘The powers of the touchstone have no doubt been much exaggerated,’ observed the gentleman appealed to, ‘though they have obtained it its classical name of Paragonius, or comparative—whence, by a strange transition, we get our word “paragon,” by-the-by, with a widely different meaning. The Italian

goldsmiths, however, put the touchstone to practical use. They rub the gold to be assayed on it, and likewise another piece of gold with whose standard they are acquainted ; on the two streaks thus left, aqua regia is poured ; and if the solvent produces the same effect, it proves the two pieces of the same standard. Nowadays, no doubt, you have much simpler and more trustworthy tests.'

'No doubt, no doubt,' said Mr. Signet. 'All is not gold that glitters, you know, Miss Thurlow ; and we know pretty well what we are about.'

'You would not be taken in,' pursued Uncle Stephen, smiling, 'like the jeweller at Florence who parted with "The Austrian"—a double rose, by-the-by—for a mere trifle, because it was so yellow that he took it for a coloured crystal. It is now in the Vienna regalia, and the largest cut diamond in Europe after the Orloff.'

'Quite true, quite true,' assented Mr. Signet. 'Still, the yellow tinge was against

it. The "King of Portugal" diamond, said to be as big as a hen's egg, is on the same account suspected of being a topaz.'

'I like that phrase, "suspected of being a topaz!"' laughed Uncle Stephen; 'it sounds quite like a criminal imputation, and in your eyes, Mr. Signet, no doubt it is so.'

'Well, yes, sir,' returned the jeweller, not quite perceiving whither the other was driving, 'in our establishment we go in only for what is genuine. We call things by their right names, do we not, Mr. Helston?'

Matthew, to whom the topic was distasteful, and, to say truth, whose mind—as it always did when left to itself—was wandering in the perilous neighbourhood of 'Madge,' of course corroborated his employer's statement, but with such slowness and hesitation that it would have left the impression upon strangers that at least half the jewels in the shop in Paulet Street were paste.

'And yet, I suppose, you and my husband could imitate diamonds if you chose; I

mean, if you were wicked enough, Mr. Signet,' observed Mrs. Helston.

'Indeed, I could not do anything of the kind,' said Matthew, precipitately. His wife had felt that he was dropping out of the conversation, and her pride perhaps had resented it; but for once she had been ill-judged in this attempt to restore the balance of power.

'That is not in Mr. Helston's line,' explained the jeweller coldly: 'his work is more mechanical.'

'I am glad of that,' said Amy curtly. 'I had rather ever so much be mechanical than imaginative, if that means making sham jewels to resemble real ones.'

'But we don't do that, indeed we don't,' pleaded Mr. Signet (he always spoke of his firm as 'we,' like Royalty), though it only consisted of himself. 'I only mean that we could imitate false diamonds if we tried, as readily as we can discern their falseness when folks endeavour to palm them off upon us for real ones.'

‘The iridescence is the difficulty, is it not?’ inquired Uncle Stephen.

‘Oh, no; we have chemical means—a little fluoric acid.’

‘Upon my word, it looks very suspicious,’ laughed Amy. Mr. Signet ‘iridesced’ himself a little—turned, that is, all sorts of colours; and yet he was by no means irritated. Amy’s laugh was so musical to his ears that he forgave the imputation that caused it.

‘Time will soon tell upon paste,’ he answered simply, ‘and expose all such malpractices.’

‘Yet the garnets and emeralds in the cup of Chosroes (supposed to have been that of King Solomon himself) were held for a thousand years to be genuine,’ remarked Uncle Stephen, ‘till modern criticism pronounced them paste and crystal.’

‘Yes, yes, it is the march of intellect that does it,’ answered Mr. Signet inconsequentially; ‘we moderns are not easily gulled.’

‘But when you are, you are proportionately angry,’ laughed Uncle Stephen. ‘You would not let off a culprit so easily as Gallienus did in the case of the gentleman who cheated his Empress by selling her false jewels for real ones.’

Mr. Signet would have said, ‘No, indeed,’ if he dared. As it was, he had the modesty to ask what punishment the Emperor had inflicted.

‘Well, he adjudged the poor wretch to be thrown naked to the lions; and when he stood trembling in the arena, the door of the den was opened, and out strutted—a capon. “*Imposturam fecit, et passus est* (He has cheated, and has now been cheated himself,)” said the Emperor.’

‘The lions ought to have had him,’ observed the jeweller, with professional indignation.

‘I am sure you don’t mean that, Mr. Signet,’ said Amy reproachfully.

And Mr. Signet, on reconsideration, and under that gentle pressure, acknowledged that he did not mean it.

The little dinner was faultless ; yet that, perhaps, was the only merit of the entertainment which the guest failed to appreciate. He had been too long accustomed to confuse costliness with goodness to understand that matter. Yet, doubtless, if he had known that it was Amy's hands which had so skilfully made the salad and mixed the claret cup, her meed of praise would not have been wanting. It was plain to all but herself that he was exceedingly struck with Amy—a circumstance, we may be sure, which did not put Matthew in better humour ; and of course it was difficult to inform Mr. Signet that all his attentions must needs be thrown away on account of a certain previous arrangement, which would have been obvious enough to him had the size of their table, and indeed of the little dining-room itself, admitted of the presence of Mr. Philip Barlow.

Perhaps it was the sense of contrast in view of his humble surroundings, or perhaps it was his own natural love of the magnificent, that set Mr. Signet off in reply to a

question of Mrs. Helston's upon the relative value of crown jewels.

He was so good as to inform them that the 'Pitt' or 'Regent' diamond had probably fetched the most money of any single stone in modern times. The mere cutting of it had cost 5,000*l.*; and after much haggling it had been purchased by the Regent Orleans for 135,000*l.*—a price supposed to be less than one-third of its value. Next to that was the 'Orloff,' for which the Prince of that name gave 90,000*l.* in money, an annuity of 4,000*l.* a year during the seller's lifetime, and a patent of nobility into the bargain.

'But, after all,' observed Uncle Stephen, 'we moderns are prudent in our expenditure in these matters, as compared with the rich men of old. The Romans carried their services of plate with them, we are told, on their remotest expeditions. Pliny tells us that Pompeius Paulinus, though only the son of a Roman knight—afterwards, by-the-by, disinherited, and no wonder—took 12,000*lbs.* weight of plate about with him when cam-

painging, an amount of barrack furniture in that way which would astonish the members of our most "crack" corps. In a later age, Joseph I. of Portugal had twenty diamond buttons, each worth 5,000*l.*, which he wore all at once on his State waistcoat.'

'It should have been a strait-waistcoat,' cried Amy disdainfully.

'Why?' inquired Mr. Signet. 'Surely, my dear young lady' (for by this time he had paid a great deal of attention not only to her, but to the claret cup), 'it is not unbecoming for kings to manifest, and as it were to typify, their exalted rank by the wearing of these priceless treasures. Indeed, but for them and persons like them, how could jewellers live?'

Over Amy's face there flitted an expression which had its counterpart in words in the famous '*Je n'en vois pas la nécessité*,' but it passed in an instant; and Uncle Stephen with a smile observed, 'What Miss Thurlow had in her mind, I think, was something of this kind:—"Could not those buttons have been

sold for much, and given to the poor ? ” an idea commendable enough in itself, but, as we know on high authority, not always to be put in practice. One might add that one cannot expect young ladies to be students of political economy, only that I remember Miss Thurlow is a student of everything. She pretends sometimes, like Miss Rosa Dartle, to ask questions for information's sake about this and that ; but it is my belief that, in reality, she knows all about them. I should not wonder if she had the whole history of gems, for instance, at her finger-ends, though she affects to despise them.’

‘ Really, dear Mr. Durham, you are too bad,’ said Amy, blushing. ‘ Mr. Signet, who does not know you so well as we do, will be taking your word for it that I am a blue-stocking, or something equally dreadful.’

‘ I should take nobody's word for *that*,’ observed Mr. Signet emphatically, and with a look of tenderness towards the young lady that was almost too much for her sister's

gravity. 'But do you *really* understand gems, Miss Thurlow ?'

'Certainly not,' answered she ; 'I have never seen any—out of a museum—that I can remember.'

'Well, here is one, the merits of which everyone can appreciate without study,' observed Mr. Signet, taking a ring from his finger. 'It is called the tree-agate, because, as you perceive, Nature has represented trees on it, and in this case even a whole landscape to boot. There are mountains, rivers, trees, and clouds, you see—that is, you *can* see with the help of a little imagination.'

'Dear me, how very curious !' exclaimed Amy. 'It is, as you say, a perfect picture.'

'In the British Museum,' observed Uncle Stephen, 'there is a pebble with an exact likeness of Chaucer on it ; and at Strawberry Hill, another with one of Voltaire. The agate is famous for such phenomena, though in old times it was still more prized for its supposed faculty of securing the love of the fair sex. Is that your experience, Mr. Signet ?'

‘Dear me, sir! I, sir? No, sir,’ stammered the jeweller. ‘I never heard of such a thing.’

‘You have found the diamond to have greater powers in that way, no doubt,’ laughed Uncle Stephen.

‘Well, ladies do prefer diamonds to agates, no doubt, and I have seen them look very gracious over a *cadeau* of the former. It is my belief that some ladies—such as Lady Pargiter—value their diamonds a good deal higher than their husbands.’

‘She is a very disagreeable woman, I understand,’ observed Mrs. Helston.

‘Well, your husband finds her very unpleasant. I want to have a word or two with you about that presently, Mrs. Helston,’ he added in an undertone. ‘But these very rich people, you see, can afford to be unpleasant; and one’s only resource is to take care they pay one for it.’

This was an observation which Mr. Signet would certainly never have made could he have forecast the ominous silence that followed it. He experienced the sen-

sation of having put his foot in a hole of unprecedented depth, without quite perceiving how it had happened: he thought he had been merely unlucky: but especially did he curse his luck in that he had just frustrated an attempt of the two ladies to leave the table for the drawing-room, and persuaded them to stay. If this remark, which seemed to have taken everybody so aback, had only been let fall before the men, he would not have cared a farthing; so jealous was he getting of his reputation in a certain quarter.

‘I suppose Lady Pargiter’s diamonds are really very valuable?’ observed Uncle Stephen, after a long pause.

‘Yes, they are, Mr. Durham,’ answered the jeweller, in a tone that was almost plaintive by comparison with that in which he usually spoke of ‘the *parure*.’ ‘With the exception of some half-a-dozen similar sets, there is nothing in Europe—I may say, in the world’ (for he was warming with his subject), ‘to be compared with them in

value. No commoner in England, if I may so designate a baronet's wife, possesses the like. And, as I have often said to your nephew, if the responsibility he incurs upon his expeditions to Moor Street is great, the trustworthiness implied in such a service is of the highest order.'

'I don't think Matthew is likely to run away with the diamonds,' observed Mr. Durham, smiling, but a little stiffly.

'Oh no: oh dear, no.' I am sure we have every confidence in him. Indeed, we don't know how we could ever place it elsewhere. That is partly what I came about—that is, I mean' (a cold perspiration began to bedew him, like that which is fabled to affect the topaz when its owner is about to get into trouble), 'I intended to speak of it before I left you. Mr. Helston talks of declining the commission for the future, which would be very detrimental to our interests. Now, as you were so kind as to introduce him to us, Mr. Durham, I hoped to persuade you to say a word in season:

that is, if it wasn't too much trouble.' And Mr. Signet fairly took out his handkerchief and mopped his face.

Here Uncle Stephen burst out laughing, which was the best thing, perhaps, he could have done for all concerned; and the two ladies exchanged a significant glance and rose from table.

'But, my dear Mrs. Helston, I want your advocacy,' pleaded the jeweller.

'I never interfere with my husband's business arrangements, Mr. Signet,' she answered; 'but I must say I think the hours he is kept up and out by Lady Pargiter's diamonds are most unreasonable. Even in summer it is bad enough, but in winter—and Matthew is far from strong—the service is a most severe one; so,' she added, with a good-natured smile, 'I cannot give you my vote and interest;' and she left the room with her sister.

Then Matthew broke for the first time the silence he had maintained for the last half-hour. 'I had intended that yesterday's

expedition to Moor Street should be my last, Mr. Signet,' said he gravely; 'but since it seems my sudden withdrawal from this service would put you to inconvenience, I will continue to perform it for you till the end of the year, which will give you time to find a substitute.'

'Well, of course it's better than crying off at once,' said Mr. Signet grudgingly; '"half a loaf is better than no bread;" let us say up to December 31st, then.'

'Compromise is the soul of diplomacy,' observed Uncle Stephen gaily. 'Come, let us toast the bargain. Pass the wine to Mr. Signet, Matthew.'

Then once more the talk returned to the Pargiter diamonds, upon the value of which the jeweller dilated with his accustomed unction, whereas Uncle Stephen rather decried them. 'To my mind,' he said, 'rarity of itself does not suggest value, though I am well aware that is not the general view: a recent traveller in China tells us that in the interior of that country he found in the place

of honour of a splendid collection of porcelain, a common black beer-bottle from England; nor, again, have I ever admired the famous bust of Louis XIII. in opal, which, though unique, I look upon as a piece of stupid extravagance where work and material are equally thrown away.'

'My good sir, I don't know about all that,' said Mr. Signet, 'but I know that in the crown of England itself there is nothing so valuable as the Pargiter diamonds.'

'That depends upon what sense you ascribe to the word value,' observed Uncle Stephen. 'If the sapphire on the cross of the crown did really come from the famous ring of Edward the Confessor, then that jewel alone would in my eyes outweigh her ladyship's whole *parure*; but putting that aside, since its authenticity is somewhat doubtful, surely the ruby in the centre of the cross, as being the very one that our fifth Henry wore at the battle of Agincourt, has a value—and a very high one—altogether independent of its being a precious stone.'

Mr. Signet shook his head ; a ruby was a ruby, he contended, whether it belonged to Lady Pargiter or to Henry V., and must be judged on its own merits. 'For my part,' he concluded, 'I am in these matters, like your nephew, sir, a radical, and see no advantage, but an immense deal of humbug, in your genealogies.'

'You remind me of another friend of mine,' smiled Uncle Stephen, 'who found interpolated in a very fine one, "Who begat Hurtah, that was a brave eater of pottage ; who begat Mazan, the first man in the world who played at dice with spectacles."'

'That sounds very funny,' observed Mr. Signet cautiously.

'Well, yes, though fun was not the finder's object,' returned Mr. Durham drily. 'But as a crucial test of your theory, Mr. Signet, would you maintain that, if the Urim and Thummim were found to-morrow—the very breastplate on which the declaration of the wrath or favour of Jehovah is said to have been written—the precious stones that

formed it would have no greater value than any of the same size you may have in Paulet Street?'

'Well, you see, they never *will* be found,' Mr. Durham, so it's no use talking about them.'

'I beg your pardon, sir, they *will* be found,' returned Uncle Stephen emphatically. 'They are, remember, indestructible, and (as one tells us who knows far more upon this subject than either you or I) they are probably now lying in some treasure-chamber of one of the old Persian capitals, and will no doubt be one day taken as "loot" by some rude soldier of the czar's.'

'How I should like to get hold of him!' remarked Mr. Signet, rubbing his hands. 'That was just how the Pitt diamond was bought so cheap. You positively make my mouth water.'

'Since you seem to prefer that to taking any more wine,' said Uncle Stephen, somewhat abruptly (for the jeweller had trodden

upon his archæological toe), 'let us join the ladies.'

If the host was slightly ruffled, his guest was far from being so; he thought he had never met a man so full of valuable information as Mr. Durham, and was wondering whether he could not put him to some practical use: and then, again, there was some one waiting—perhaps for him?—in the drawing-room, who had even a greater attraction for him.

'Miss Thurlow,' murmured the little man, as he sat beside her somewhat later, looking over the pages of a photograph-book, 'I shall never forget this pleasant evening.'

'I am sure, Mr. Signet, we shall recollect it with equal pleasure,' answered Amy civilly.

'No, no; that is not to be expected,' he replied; 'but—now, would you do me a little favour?'

'Most certainly, Mr. Signet, if it lies in my power.'

'Then, pray accept this tree-agate. Nay,

it has no value, beyond its having excited your admiration—only, I should like you, when you look upon it, to remember—this evening.’ Amy scarcely knew whether to laugh or to be annoyed; under ordinary circumstances, she would certainly have declined his present; but it was really very good-natured of him, and to refuse it might be to offend her brother’s employer, who was at present evidently well disposed to all of them; and he had assured her that it was of no intrinsic value.

‘But really, Mr. Signet——’ said she.

‘Nay, not another word: it is not worth your thanks,’ he said. ‘Dear me, how late it is! Mrs. Helston, the time has passed so quickly under your roof that I was quite unaware of the hour. My carriage must have been here this long while: I am sure I must be keeping you all up.’

‘No, no, you are not like Lady Pargiter,’ said Sabey, laughing. ‘Well, if you *mus.* go;’ whereupon Mr. Signet took his leave in the most friendly manner.

‘Oh dear,’ sighed Sabey, when Matthew had returned from seeing their visitor off the premises, ‘I’m so glad it’s over ; how do you think it all went off?’

‘Admirably,’ said Mr. Durham, laughing. ‘I hope I talked shop enough to please him.’

‘You behaved to perfection, uncle,’ cried Sabey, kissing him. ‘I am sure Mr. Signet thinks there is nobody like you—in which I quite agree with him.’

‘Nay, it was your sister who was his great attraction,’ said Mr. Durham.

‘That’s true,’ laughed Sabey. ‘I am sure, if Mr. Barlow had been here, he would have been frightfully jealous. I must say I never did see anyone lay herself out to please anyone as Amy did.’

‘For shame!’ said Amy, blushing : ‘of course I felt compelled to be civil to him : and I am bound to say he was very civil to me : he actually gave me—or you, I am not sure which, Sabey ; he said it was to remind us of this pleasant evening—this tree-agate.’

‘Oh my goodness!’ exclaimed Sabey, clasping her hands delightedly.

‘I don’t think you should have taken his ring, Amy,’ interposed Matthew gravely.

‘My dear Matt, what could I do? I never thought of it being a ring; he called it “this tree-agate.” I hope I have not done wrong. He assured me that it had no intrinsic value.’

‘That is not the point,’ said Matthew.

‘Well, I don’t see the least harm in it,’ contended Sabey warmly. ‘You are making Amy quite uncomfortable. What do *you* say, Uncle Stephen?’

‘I am quite sure Mr. Signet never thought of it as a ring at all—in the sense you are thinking of,’ replied Mr. Durham.

‘Then, doubtless, there is no harm done,’ observed Matthew, who had great confidence in his uncle’s judgment. ‘It was Mr. Signet’s own fault, of course, in any case; and it was taking a great liberty.’

‘Nevertheless, everything went off so well, I am glad he came,’ said Sabey.

‘I am still more glad he is gone,’ replied Matthew, still far from appeased. And he went off to smoke his nightly pipe.

‘Well, for my part,’ said Sabey, ‘I like our friend a great deal better than I expected to do. He is almost like the ugly duck in Hans Christian Andersen’s story who turned out to be a swan.’

‘He is a great deal more like a cygnet who has turned out to be a goose,’ said Amy, taking up her bed-candle.

‘Now, that is very ungrateful of you,’ said Sabey, laughing at the little pun; then added in lower tones, ‘You are not really annoyed, I do hope. Dear Matt is so prejudiced, or else I am sure he would never have said you were wrong to take the ring.’

‘I am not annoyed with Matt, but with myself,’ said Amy. ‘I’ll send it back to the man to-morrow morning.’

‘I would not do that,’ put in Uncle Stephen, gently; ‘it would be making too much of a trifle.’

‘There, you hear what Uncle Stephen

says ; pray don't think any more about it, Amy. Good night, darling.' Then she turned to Mr. Durham.

'How thankful I am to you, uncle, for your good advice to my sister, who, I can see is more annoyed at this behaviour of our visitor's even than she seems. I was glad to hear you say you were sure Mr. Signet did not think of his gift being a ring, which, of course, would have had a certain significance—now, what are you laughing at?'

'I was laughing at the notion of Barlow and Signet being rivals.'

'Oh, how *can* you, Uncle Stephen ! Of course Mr. Signet could have no idea of *that* kind. You say yourself he was thinking, not of the ring, but of the agate.'

'So he was,' returned the other gravely ; 'he was thinking of what I said at dinner—that a tree-agate gained for its possessor the love of women : and now he has given it to Amy in hopes of its having some sort of reciprocal action.'

'Oh, Uncle Stephen, what a dreadful

notion! I hope you won't tell dear Matt what you think about it: it will worry him so.'

'My dear Sabey,' returned the old gentleman, impressively, 'I am as grey as any goose, I know, and, I fear, have as disproportionate a liver, but I am *not* a goose. Good night, dear.'

CHAPTER XI.

HYBLA MEWS.

A MAN might flatter himself he knew London —by which, of course, I mean the West End of it, since it can be no compliment to anybody to be thought to know the City—and yet he might well be unacquainted with Hybla Mews, Brompton. The district, indeed, is fashionable enough, and, if slightly ‘naughty,’ would not on that account be a *terra incognita* to the sort of person who plumes himself on his metropolitan knowledge; but the little row of tenements I have in my mind, though contiguous to the madding crowd, is so secluded from it that it easily escapes attention. The advantages of its position are not such as to rivet the common eye even if it has gained its attention. The houses consist but of one story,

are separated from one another but by a narrow space, and their ground-floor is for the most part tenanted by quadrupeds. I do not say by 'horses,' because I like to be exact, and some of them are occupied by cows. In the latter case, if you looked suddenly and incautiously out of a first-floor window, and found the down-stair lodger doing the like, you were nearer her horns than was pleasant; but, on the other hand, the aroma was more agreeable than if you lived over the horses.

I know my countrymen, and am far too wise to say a word against that noble animal which is the object of worship with so many of them, but the horse is not an agreeable creature, especially in the summer time, to have on your ground-floor. His *bouquet* is wholesome, I have heard upon the highest authority, but, like most other wholesome things, it is not very nice; and he is undoubtedly noisy. Of course, under the circumstances, it cannot be expected that he should take his shoes off when he retires to

rest, but the clatter he ~~makes~~ with them, in the ~~watches~~ of the night, is terrible and almost continuous.

Mrs. Rutherford, honest John's wife, who dwelt immediately over three very fine ones, had a theory that they slept on three legs, relieved by the fourth at intervals of uncertain duration—just as whist is played in France, with a dummy, and one man out. It was the changes, of course, and not the peculiarity, of this little game, to which she objected, and often would she lie and 'drat' them to her husband, who was himself quite indifferent to such disturbances. But over him, as over every male who lived in Hybla Mews, the horses exercised an influence, both moral and material, before which that even of the Brahma Bull in its native land sinks into insignificance. He did not worship them, indeed, but (in conjunction with his cabs) they were his means of livelihood, and his thoughts and aspirations were infinitely more concerned with them than with humanity. It was not so wonderful, perhaps,

pr 33 .. } .. weller in Hybla Mews might
 pr 32 .. } .. l to breathe horse, as well as
 pr 31 .. } ..
 pr 30 .. } .. , hear him, and imbibe him at
 pr 29 .. } ..
 pr 28 .. } .. re ; only, it had no such moral
 pr 27 .. } ..
 pr 26 .. } .. upon the women. As a rule, they

pr 25 .. } .. thought of horses as creatures who
 pr 24 .. } ..
 pr 23 .. } .. ept their husbands up at night, and caused
 pr 22 .. } ..
 pr 21 .. } .. them to lose money in backing them. For
 pr 20 .. } .. though, of course, these were no racehorses,
 pr 19 .. } .. some of them were cousins and even half-
 pr 18 .. } .. brothers of such ; and these equine relations
 pr 17 .. } .. led every male inhabitant, from Lord Tom-
 pr 16 .. } .. noddys head-groom down to Dick Dartmoor,
 pr 15 .. } .. the waterman of the neighbouring cabstand,
 pr 14 .. } .. to follow—though of necessity at a distance
 pr 13 .. } .. —the profession of the Turf. It was even
 pr 12 .. } .. whispered that at the ‘ Rising Sun,’ the
 pr 11 .. } .. public at the corner of the Mews, to which
 pr 10 .. } .. poor Dick clung like a limpet in the winter
 pr 9 .. } .. months, a gentleman might put his money
 pr 8 .. } .. on any coming event, with a reasonable
 pr 7 .. } .. prospect (if his horse should win) of getting
 pr 6 .. } .. it back again with interest : for the landlord
 pr 5 .. } .. was a ‘ knowing card,’ and understood the

penalties of keeping a betting-house—and how to avoid them. He was a man of capital, having married Miss Hibeler, a Hebrew lady, whose father had built the Mews, and intended it to hand his name down to posterity, only the Board of Works, through ignorance, or haply through poetical association, had (on a tablet let into the corner house) rendered it ‘Hybla.’

It was a more picturesque spot, on the whole, than you would imagine, for it had open galleries running round or nearly round it, above the stables, in which the ladies were wont to sit and work in the fine warm weather, among nasturtiums, mignonette, and other flowering plants—which, however, all smelt of the horse as though they had grown out of him ; and where the men who had leisure lolled, and leant, and spat, and exchanged conversation with their less fortunate friends below, who were hissing over their tired steeds, with many a ‘Woa,’ and a ‘Now *then*, stupid,’ and a ‘Stand still, *can’t* you,’ which, varied by an occasional

‘fling out’ of a couple of iron heels, diversified rather than interrupted the dialogue.

Of all the tenants of the Mews, Mr. John Rutherford was perhaps the most fortunate as respected leisure; for, having two horses, and as many cabs, of his own, and having been spared, as he has hinted to us, the burden of paternity, and also having those ‘odd jobs’ in connection with ‘Master Matthew,’ for which he was very handsomely paid, there was no such necessity for exertion as existed in other cases—and without that stimulus this honest fellow was the last man in the world to work; in his eyes (and I quite agree with him), it would have been nothing less than flying in the face of Providence.

He employed himself in his hours of leisure with his pipe, and occasionally in perusing some sporting journal, though, to say truth, this was done (just as I have seen gentlemen of much higher position perusing a French newspaper at their club) rather with the intention of impressing the public

with his literary acquirements than from any personal gratification he derived from it. His education, in fact, had been much neglected, the delights of snaring hares and rabbits in his boyhood having seduced him from attendance at the village school; and his punishment in mature years was this, that he could often only acquire printed information, that would otherwise have been easily within his grasp, by a subtlety which, even when crowned with success, was not unaccompanied with a certain sense of humiliation.

‘There’s a very pretty account of that there “set-to” down at Hanley, Sally, in this here paper,’ he would observe to his good woman, who usually sat beside him in the verander (as she called it) on these occasions.

‘*Is* there?’ she would reply, with an indifferent air, and proceeding with her knitting even more assiduously than before.

‘It is very *interesting* indeed, my dear.’

‘I am glad you like it, John.’

‘Well, of course I like it; but I should relish it a deal better if I heard you read it. It’s a sort of thing as should be read aloud, and you’ve just got the voice for it, Sally.’

‘Get along with you, John; you mean as how it’s got some longish words in it. Well, give us the paper, though I don’t hold with your “set-tos” any more than with your horse-races.’

Thus Mrs. Rutherford’s out-door ‘readings’ would be given readily enough, but with the distinct understanding that she was not imposed upon by any compliment to her vocal organs.

If that lady had been younger, and less of the hue of the carnation (for, to use his own racing phraseology, she ‘sporting her husband’s colours’), and if the gallery had been a summer-house in Italy, and, above all, had the loving pair been unmarried, it would have been quite the garden scene from Francesca of Rimini over again. As it was, and notwithstanding its vulgar surroundings, and that the subject was a prize

fight instead of a poem, the affair had a very pretty touch of domesticity ; and though she mightn't enjoy it as she did the novel (bless her !) in her Sunday paper, Sally was glad to think that the learning (imparted in her youth by Mrs. Thurlow, Sabey's mother, in the village school at Tarlton) now enabled her to afford a gratification to her husband which kept him out of mischief in his idle time, as well as immensely impressed him with her talents and wisdom.

It was on the afternoon but one after the little dinner-party in Cavendish Grove, that Matthew Helston's charioteer chanced to be enjoying a reading of this kind from the lips of his faithful spouse ; the intellectual treat was of a higher order than usual, for not only were the details of a prize-fight described with all the dramatic force and technical skill of 'our special "Fancy" correspondent,' but the narrative possessed the unaccustomed element of Tragedy ; for one of the combatants had been slain ; a blow upon his 'conk' had not

only 'drawn the claret,' but his life's blood. The death of the hero was magnificently portrayed, but even that description sank into insignificance when compared with the eulogy pronounced on the Departed. 'If ever greatness of soul raised the character of man,' wrote the special correspondent of the 'Sporting Buffer,' 'or humanity shone resplendent in the heart of a human being, a purer claim to those inestimable qualities was never put in than in the case of Billy Barlins, the Putney Slasher.'

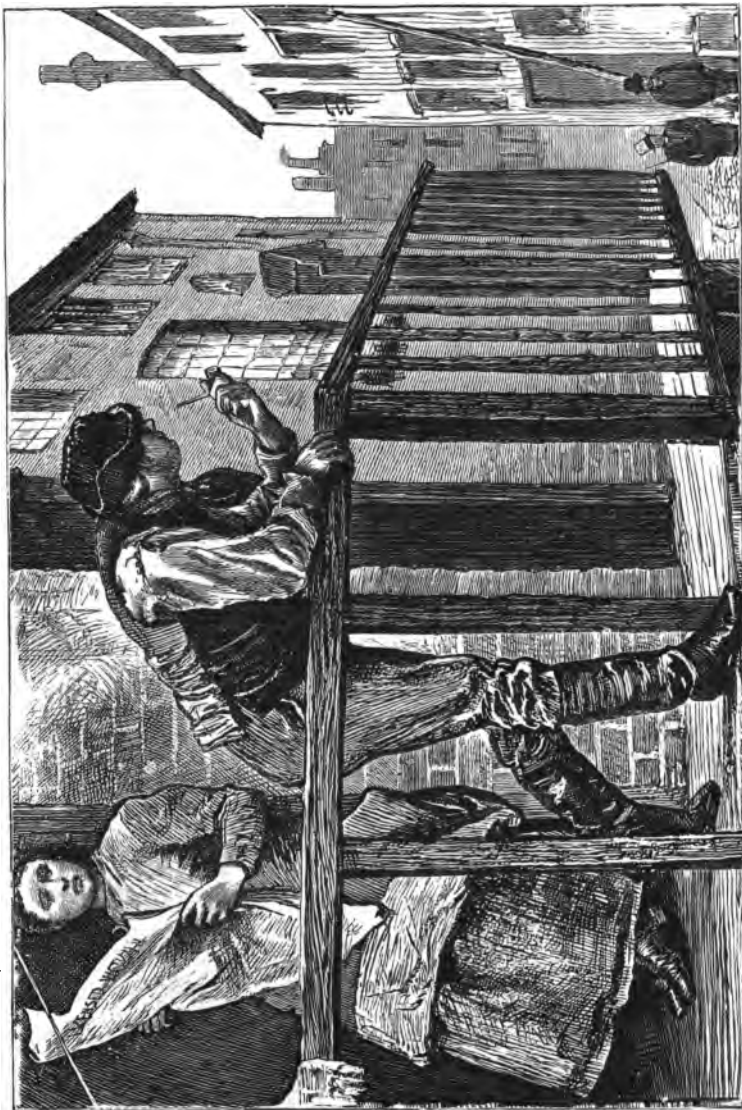
In a voice broken with emotion, Mrs. Rutherford had just finished the last pathetic lines, when, looking up for compliment and applause from her audience (as even the most modest of readers will do), she perceived that its attention had been distracted elsewhere. Her husband was leaning over the railing of the gallery, and staring intently at two men who were coming down the Mews.

'Well, I'm sure!' she exclaimed with considerable disgust, and a toss of her head that shook her cap-strings.

'Who on earth is that swell as Dick Dartmoor has got with him, Sally?' was her husband's inconsequential rejoinder.

Sally was much too hurt at his inattention to her reading to vouchsafe any reply, but her glance followed the direction of his eyes, and, in spite of herself, surveyed with some curiosity the stranger in question. He was a thick-set bull-necked man of no very attractive appearance, and, though dressed in well-cut clothes, with a fine scarf-pin and albert chain, was scarcely the sort of 'swell' depicted by Mr. Du Maurier. The contrast, however, between his appearance and that of his companion—who was almost in rags, and, where his gaiters should by rights have come, wore a couple of haybands twisted round his ankles—was sufficiently striking. Mr. Richard Dartmoor had obviously gone to the dogs, whereas the puffy face and evil eyes of the other were at present the only signs that he was on the road thither.

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coming here !' continued Mr. Rutherford excitedly. 'What can they be up to ?'

'To no good, if Dick Dartmoor's one of 'em,' returned his lady curtly.

'Mark my words, Sally, it's a tip o' some kind.'

'Then if it is—mark mine—Dick 'll tip you over.' Mrs. Rutherford had as good cause to distrust the 'early information' given by Dick Dartmoor to her husband as the Trojans had to fear the gifts of the Greeks in the horse line. As he himself confessed in moments of repentance, if it hadn't been for Dick's 'perfect certainties,' he would have been richer by many a five-pound note.

'Genelman wants to see *you*, John,' exclaimed Dick, calling from below ; his voice was husky and somewhat thick with liquor, and, as though aware of that fact, he pointed to the 'genelman' with his finger to give significance to his words.

'Proud, I'm sure,' said John, removing the fur cap which he wore at all seasons

without the least reference to the temperature. 'Walk up, sir.'

While the heavy creak of the stranger's step, followed by Dick's well-known shambling stumble, was heard upon the stairs, Mrs. Rutherford leant forward towards her husband, and whispered, 'I don't like the look of 'im, and I mean to see this out, John.'

John nodded assent, or at all events acquiescence; he was quite sober (and therefore tractable), and he knew that when his good lady said, 'I mean,' she meant it.

'Captling Langton,' said Dick, appearing for a moment from the inner room in his haybands, in the character of master of the ceremonies, and then retiring; 'him as you've heard of before now, John, New-market way.'

'A way I don't like,' murmured Mrs. Rutherford to herself, but nevertheless bobbing a curtsey and handing the visitor a chair.

'I doubt whether this gallery will bear

the three of us,' observed the Captain, stepping on it with affected apprehension ; ' we're not such light weights as we were, missus.'

' There has been more than three on this verander before now, sir,' was her somewhat curt reply ; after his calling her ' missus,' and making that reference to her weight (which was a tender topic with her), she was more disinclined than ever to permit this man to confer with her John alone.

' Very good, ma'am ; then we'll risk it,' said the stranger cheerfully : ' I only came to ask a question of your husband, who knows me well enough by name, no doubt.'

' Well, yes, sir,' said John : ' I've heard Dick speak of you many times. You're his employer, ain't you? '

' I don't know that I'm quite that,' laughed the Captain. ' He does little odd jobs for me on the Downs sometimes.'

' Tout? ' suggested Mrs. Rutherford, uncompromisingly.

' Why, yes, ma'am, he does occasionally act for me in that useful capacity. There's

very little doing, however, on the Turf just now. We're looking for the spring, as usual, to relieve us.'

'Ah!' said the lady. It was but a monosyllable, but it spoke volumes. If it had been paraphrased, it would have run satirically, 'And much good you will do with it when the spring comes, no doubt!'

She looked so very antagonistic, that the Captain abandoned his attempts at conciliation in that quarter, and addressed himself to her husband.

'You drive a cab, do you not, Mr. Rutherford?'

'I drive two cabs, sir,' returned that gentleman with some dignity: 'a 'ansom and a four-wheeler.'

'Not both at once,' laughed the Captain, 'surely. However, I have heard they are very good ones—quite private vehicles, eh, or at all events let for private jobs?'

'I only goes on one private job,' returned John, still a little stiffly, for he did not like jokes at the expense of his property, of which he was very proud.

‘Well, I suppose you can go on another one, if it is made worth your while: you are accustomed to night-work, as I understand?’

‘I do do a little night-work, but it’s a special case.’

‘Yes, I know all about that,’ said the Captain carelessly, as he threw away the stump of his cigar and lit a fresh one; ‘you go to Moor Street: I have a slight acquaintance with Sir Charles myself; his Artemis is a pretty filly, Mr. Rutherford.’

‘You may say that, sir. I’ve not seen her myself, but they do tell me——’ here he was about to sink his voice into the proper pitch for discussing that ‘secret known to all,’ a good Turf ‘tip,’ when he was arrested by a change in his wife’s demeanour: she had dropped her knitting, and was regarding the Captain from behind with a look of intense alarm and suspicion.

The Captain turned to see what had caused honest John’s hesitation, but Mrs. Rutherford was knitting away again as if she

had backed her needles against time and was winning at the post.

‘You need have no secrets from me, Mr. Rutherford, as to Artemis,’ said the visitor, smiling. ‘Though perhaps, on the other hand, I could tell you a thing or two worth hearing. However, we will talk of that another time. You were saying that the Moor Street business kept you up pretty late o’ nights.’

‘I never said a word about it,’ said John doggedly.

‘Did you not? Oh, then, it was Sir Charles himself who told me. It must be a rather unpleasant job in winter time—though, indeed, her ladyship’s coachman is a fellow-sufferer with you. Now, to what time does she keep it up—I mean, about what hour have you to call at her house, in general?’

Mrs. Rutherford’s fingers were once more idle, but this time she held one of her needles high up in the air, a signal for caution and for silence.

‘The hour varies,’ answered John, puffing at his pipe.

‘I can understand that,’ said the Captain, ‘woman herself being variable. And you have a long way to come and go from Mr. —Mr. Helston’s. Let us see, where was it Sir Charles told me he lives?’

Again the knitting-needle is held up, and this time with an air of unmistakable warning.

‘Up Bayswater way,’ answered John coolly.

‘Well, the job I want you for will not be so far as that. You shall name your own terms for it, which I am sure will be reasonable. And in the mean time—to show I mean business—I will beg your acceptance of this little retaining-fee.’ He held out half-a-sovereign between his finger and thumb.

John looked towards his wife, but, perceiving no sign to the contrary, pocketed the coin readily enough, with a ‘Thank yer, Captin.’

‘You’ve got a nice place here, Mrs. Rutherford,’ said the visitor, looking round and sniffing the air, which perhaps was really grateful to him, for the stable was, as it were, his native atmosphere. ‘The Mews is a safe playground for the children.’

‘That don’t much matter to us,’ observed John, laughing, ‘for we ain’t a-got none.’

‘And a very good thing, too,’ replied the Captain, in no way abashed by his little mistake. ‘I have always shrunk from family cares myself. Well, well, you shall hear from me shortly, Mr. Rutherford. Good evening, ma’am.’ Mrs. Rutherford rose and bobbed.

‘Shrimps and watercress,’ said the Captain patronisingly, as, followed by John, he passed through their little sitting-room, where the tea-table was already spread. ‘That looks very appetising. I doat on shrimps.’

‘Take one, sir, or half a dozen, for the matter of that,’ said John hospitably.

‘No, I thank you. I should have been delighted, only I have not yet dined. What

nice stairs you've got—except that they're a little steep. Good evening, John.'

And the Captain sauntered up the Mews, with a good deal of 'side on,' which became a positive swagger as he emerged into the more fashionable street.

'Well, what do you think of *that*, Sally?' inquired Mr. Rutherford, not a little curious to know his wife's opinion of their recent visitor and the cause of his condescension. 'What do you say to our friend the Captain?'

'I think, for one thing, he's a liar,' replied that lady. 'He "doats on shrimps," does he? and, "what nice stairs you've got—only a trifle steep." It would have been a good thing, in my opinion, if they'd a-been a trifle steeper and broke his neck.'

'Well, he gave us a half a couter, at all events,' pleaded John in mitigation.

'We should ha' got that any way,' was her logical rejoinder. 'That man's after no good, John. Why did he want to know what time you went to Moor Street o' nights, and where Master Matthew lived?'

‘Why, it was all about this private job of his, I reckon ; whether I could do the same——’

‘John, you’re a fool !’ interrupted Mrs. Rutherford. ‘I don’t like you any the less for that, but rather better ; only, you’re too easily taken in. If I had not took root here with my knitting, it’s my belief you would ha’ told that fellow everything.’

‘But he knowed it all beforehand,’ urged Mr. Rutherford, sensible of weakness and of putting forth a feeble plea.

‘He did not. He only knowed a little, and wanted to know a little more. The question he came to put to you had nothing to do with your cab at all ; he don’t want your cab—not he !’

‘Then what on earth does he want, Sally ?’

Mrs. Rutherford leant forward, with her fat hands on her fat knees, and whispered solemnly—‘He wants what he knowed better than to say a word about, John. He never mentioned ’em from first to last ; but what

that 'ere feller wants is Lady Pargiter's diamonds !'

If Mrs. Rutherford expected an eulogy upon her sagacity, or even an outbreak of astonishment at her ingenious discovery, she was doomed to be disappointed. Perhaps her husband thought he had made admissions enough of her superiority of intelligence ; or perhaps the subject of which she spoke had been too long familiarised to his own mind to permit of wonder at any allusion to it.

'Oh, he do, do he ?' was, at all events, his philosophical reply. 'There's a many more as wants 'em, too. Howsomenever, only one can get 'em at best ; and as for the rest, Want will be their master.'

'At best ? Why, what do you mean, John ?'

'Well, at worst then, if you like it better.'

'Of course I like it better. Why, what *are* you thinking of ?' cried the good lady, with genuine alarm.

'Thinking ? How can a fool think ?'

(John little imagined how he was imitating Sir Charles Pargiter, Bart., in thus replying to his good lady—men are so alike.) ‘But I knows what I knows.’ With which mysterious observation he knocked out the ashes of his pipe against the gallery railing, and, regardless of his tea and shrimps and his indignant Sally, went out of doors and into the street.

CHAPTER XII.

‘HOW MUCH CAN I RAISE ON THEM?’

It has been said by some cynic that there is no one so rich but that he would be glad of a thousand pounds, and it is certainly true that there is no one who does not grudge having to pay that sum away. Indeed, the richer a man is, the more he seems to feel parting with his wealth; and in the case of one very rich indeed—a man, as we may say, ‘made of money’—it is perhaps only natural that he should resent having any portion of himself thus abstracted. He feels it even when he discharges his own debts; how much more, then, when he has to discharge the debts of other people!

Only imagine, therefore, the condition of mind of Lady Pargiter upon discovering one fine morning—for the letter that informed

her of it arrived when she was still in her dressing-room—that she had to pay, not one thousand pounds, but twenty thousand, for her husband's gambling debts ! It is true that she had suspected their existence. When she had married him he had frankly hinted that he was not wholly without encumbrances of this kind, but for such an amount as this he had by no means prepared her. He had solemnly promised that he would never run a horse, or bet on one, after he became her husband ; and yet she had good reason to believe that a portion at least of this enormous liability had been incurred of late months ; and next to the existence of the debt itself, this was the bitterest sting to her of all—that he had lied to her. Not that Lady Pargiter had any abstract admiration of Truth, or horror of Lying ; that she herself should be the victim of his duplicity was what she resented. It was probable—she thought it would be the merest justice—that she was not liable for her husband's debts. Her money had been so tied up to her that

she was tolerably certain he could not get at it. But then, if this debt was not paid, Sir Charles would be disgraced; and this cannot happen to any husband without his wife sharing in the same condemnation. If he could have been sent to prison in private—to some such place as the Bastile, for instance, by *lettre de cachet*—she would have let him go without pity; but there could be no privacy in this matter. Indeed, though he so richly deserved it, he could not be sent to prison; nor even made a bankrupt, because these were debts of so-called honour; and though Lady Pargiter’s views of ‘honour’ were in this respect very similar to those of Falstaff, she knew that she could not ignore them.

Of the fact of his liabilities there could be no doubt, for the schedule of debts was from her husband’s lawyer, and it was accompanied by a communication from himself. (Sir Charles was on his moor—*her* moor—in the Highlands, and she was still in her London home.) It was, on the whole, a manly

letter, with considerable good feeling in it; but unfortunately it had no tender feeling. He confessed that his debts were larger than they ought to be, or than he himself had suspected. He expressed sorrow that he was compelled to come to her for pecuniary assistance, and for so much of it. But this was the first and the last time he would ask her help.

When she read that, her thin lips grew very disdainful, for he seemed thereby to seek to imply that he had given up the Turf, instead of having broken his pledged word concerning it. Her astuteness, however, here over-reached itself. Sir Charles had *not* broken his word, in spite of the belief of 'honest John' and some other wiseacres to the contrary, whose wish perhaps (for Sir Charles was himself a Turf favourite) had been father to the scandal. The Baronet neither owned Artemis nor any other horse, nor did he now bet on horse-races; though he had solaced himself for those acts of self-denial by 'putting the pot on' at

cards, and all other 'events' concerning which wagers were possible. It may, doubtless, be said that he had thus lied in the spirit if not in the letter. But that was not Sir Charles's view; and, considering the number of persons who do not even make that exception, perhaps he was still above the average in morals.

He was, at all events, no adept in duplicity, or his letter would have been far otherwise worded; for if it had been possible to simulate affection, here was surely not only the opportunity, but the necessity for it. When one has to write to one's wife—'Be so good as to pay 20,000*l.* for me,' it is judicious to address her as 'Dearest Julia' at the very least; whereas he had begun his note, 'My dear Lady Pargiter,' and ended it not much more warmly.

Her ladyship had a tiring-maid, by name Patty Selwood (ordinarily addressed as 'Selwood,' like a peer), who was present on the occasion of her receiving this bad news. She was a tall handsome girl of the French

type, with high cheek bones, fresh colour (indeed it was 'fresh twice a day,' like the strawberries), and an eye to the main chance and the weaknesses of her mistress. For the most part, she had rather a hard time of it; indeed, her lot would have been well-nigh intolerable had she not thoroughly understood the theory (and practice) of compensation; for when her mistress was in a temper, 'my lady's lady's-maid,' as Patty delighted to call herself, got the full benefit of it; and of all the 'bad quarters of an hour' she experienced, those which were occupied in attiring Lady Pargiter in the morning were the worst.

Her ladyship was never good-looking, but her resemblance to the equine race was more marked than ever, before (if I may be allowed the expression) she was groomed; and, strange to say, she was aware of this—that is to say, she knew that she was less attractive before noon than afterwards, and, resenting the fact, she visited this offence of Nature upon her maid.

On the present occasion, however, matters

were far otherwise. The misfortune that had befallen her was too tremendous for any feelings of mere irritation. Like the poet, she was for the present dowered with 'the scorn of scorns, the hate of hates,' and all little outbreaks of 'temper' were quenched and overwhelmed by it. Moreover, sad to say, though Lady Pargiter had two or three bushels of visiting-cards on her malachite tray below stairs, she had not a friend in the world; and in the rare cases, such as this, when the necessity of sharing a sorrow or reposing a confidence in one arose, she was accustomed, *faute de mieux*, to confide in her waiting-maid.

If, dear reader, you conceive this to be unnatural in a person of Lady Pargiter's rank and importance, it only shows that you know very little of such fashionable folks, and (I fear) must needs belong to what we used to call at Eton 'the lower middle.' There are many ladies whose time is so engrossed in important matters—such as you read of in the 'Morning Post'—that they have no

leisure, even if they had the opportunity, for making friendships with their own sex; whereas, while they are being dressed and undressed, they have plenty of it.

There was an unmistakable sign by which Patty Selwood understood that morning that her mistress was in the confidential mood. She addressed her as 'Patty' instead of 'Selwood.'

'Patty,' she said, as that young woman was combing out her scanty locks with a view to select a spot upon her head on which to affix a very fine collection of them from other sources, 'I am a very miserable woman.'

'Indeed, my lady, you should not be,' said Patty reassuringly.

'Of course I should not be; but there is no justice nor truth nor honour in the world,' replied she vehemently—'that is, in man.'

'Very true, my lady,' sighed the waiting-maid. She had intended to be sympathetic, and to imply that she too had proved the falsehood and injustice of the other sex; but herein she made a mistake; she did not re-

flect that heiresses with ever so many thousands a year have sorrows compared with which those of the lower classes are mere flea-bites.

'Tush! how should *you* know?' returned her mistress with irritation. '*You* were never ruined.'

'Well, no, my lady; not as I knows on,' she added prudently. 'I never were.'

'Well, this letter here means ruin—or something like it. What would *you* say, if someone wrote to you to say that you had twenty thousand pounds to pay for somebody else's debts?'

'Lack a mercy, my lady! Twenty thousand pounds!' The idea of having to pay it she put aside as too great an effort of fancy; the mention of the sum itself was overwhelming.

'Yes: that's what I am asked to pay: and for what do you suppose, Patty?'

The reply expected, of course, was 'gambling debts;' but as these were matters altogether out of Patty's experience, she

naturally suggested the most expensive thing with which she was acquainted: she had once given five-and-twenty shillings herself for a bracelet of Brighton diamonds. 'Well, for jewels, I suppose, my lady. Your diamond necklace cost as much or more, you once told me.'

'No, not for jewels, Patty.' Here she stopped a little: she had had it in her mind to tell the whole story of her wrongs to her waiting-maid, but the mention of her diamonds turned her thoughts at once into that direction. If it should be absolutely necessary to pay this enormous sum, the *parure* was perhaps what she could best afford to part with; it was dear to her, indeed, as the apple of her eye, but her money was still dearer. She knew absolutely nothing of business matters; and therefore it was, perhaps, that stock and scrip and share (that is, her own possessions in them) had such an inestimable value for her; she set such a 'fancy price' upon her numerous investments, that to sell out any one of them to

defray a gambling debt seemed a positive act of sacrilege. 'Yes, my diamonds cost more than that,' she continued, musing. 'The probate duty on them was as for twenty-five thousand pounds.'

'Deary me! what, for coming out of the country!' ejaculated Patty: she had confused 'Probate' with 'Export,' and imagined that the Customs in Golconda had exacted that considerable sum for permitting the diamonds to leave their native soil. Her mistress, however, was too deep in thought to notice this misapprehension of Patty's. 'Yes,' she resumed, half to herself, 'the probate duty ought to fix the value; and yet I have always understood that papa could never sell them at the price he gave for them.' (If she not only understood this, but believed it, it was a very touching proof of the simplicity of her ladyship's nature.) 'I doubt whether even twenty thousand pounds could be got for them.'

'But I thought I heard you say, my lady,' said Patty, 'that if Messrs. Star and Signet

were to lose the jewels, or if they were stolen while under their care, they would have to pay you twenty-five thousand pounds.'

'That is true,' asserted her ladyship. 'It would be a good thing if they *were* lost or stolen, so far.'

'Well, they are pretty sure to be stole, your ladyship, one day or another,' observed Patty comfortingly.

'Sure to be stolen!' cried Lady Pargiter, aghast at the curtness of the other's tone; 'who says they are?'

'Oh, well, my lady, everybody. Of course, there's a deal of care taken against it; but the odds is——' and there she stopped, not for want of words (which never failed her), but because she saw that her mistress was not favouring her with her attention.

'To think,' sighed Lady Pargiter, after a long pause, 'that things should come to such a pass that I should feel it an advantage to have my diamonds stolen!'

'What a thing it would be if one could

keep the jewels and get the money too!' observed Patty vaguely.

'Eh, what!' cried her ladyship, struck for one moment with this delightful prospect, but the next perceiving its futility; 'how can you talk such rubbish? Can one have one's cake and eat it too, you stupid girl?'

'I only said "what a thing it would be, my lady,"' explained Patty apologetically.

'The girl is an idiot,' remarked Lady Pargiter, addressing herself aloud in the looking-glass. 'That will do, Selwood: you may leave the room.'

Of course she had not forgotten, during all this tittle-tattle, the terrible circumstance that had given rise to it; namely, that her husband owed twenty thousand pounds, and that she had to pay it; but having once appreciated the fact, and notwithstanding that she was filled with dismay and indignation because of it, her mind was so practical that it at once turned to those means of discharging the liability which Patty had unconsciously suggested to her. Accepted bills,

as the lawyer had ventured to remind her, must be met when they become due ; whereas one can pay out one's husband at any time. If, as she was but too well convinced, there was no escaping this frightful obligation, her diamonds must be parted with, and it became at once a matter of absorbing interest with her to know what might be raised upon them. She knew that her late father had retained them because they would not 'fetch their price'—that is, the price he valued them at ; but she had a vague notion (her ideas, indeed, about everything were vague, though she had so keen a perception of her own interests and of what she wanted), that the value of precious stones was liable to great fluctuations : it was possible, she thought, that the *parure* might now realise twenty-five thousand pounds, though some years ago it had failed to do so ; and the person who was most likely to give her information upon this subject was Mr. Signet.

Without, therefore, saying a word more to Patty about the catastrophe that had be-

fallen her, and even perhaps regretting that she had said so much (which, indeed, as Fate ordained it, she had eventually good reason to do), Lady Pargiter ordered her carriage and drove to Paulet Street.

The jeweller was out, but expected back again shortly ; so the distinguished visitor was ushered into the parlour, as the apartment was termed in which Matthew Helston worked.

He rose and bowed ; Lady Pargiter nodded with patronising carelessness, as though a crossing-sweeper had thanked her for a penny, and became enraptured with a cuckoo clock. Then it suddenly struck her that this ‘person’—as she always termed the parent of Madge, and possible transformer of the present methods of locomotion throughout the civilised world—might be useful to her in her projected inquiry, as a check upon his employer. The latter would, no doubt, attempt to cheapen the *parure*, while Matthew, having no personal advantage to gain by misrepresentation, might just possibly tell the truth about it.

‘Oh, by-the-by, Mr.—I forget your name——’

‘Helston, madam,’ observed Matthew gravely.

‘To be sure; it is you who have the charge of my diamonds, is it not? Now, I wish to ask you, as one doubtless acquainted with such matters, what you think they are worth?’

‘I always understood, madam, that the guarantee given by Mr. Signet——’

‘Yes, yes, I know that, of course,’ she interrupted impatiently; ‘that’s a mere nominal sum, fixed so high, perhaps, in order that more may be charged for taking care of them.—You don’t think so?’ For Matthew had shrugged his shoulders, and smiled, it must be confessed, a little scornfully. ‘You think they are worth the money, then: perhaps more, even; well, now, how much more?’

‘Indeed, madam, I did not mean to imply that. The value of a thing is often very wrongly defined as what it will fetch; but in

the case of precious stones, it is a tolerably correct statement. To one who is an admirer of such things, your diamonds would no doubt be an object of immense attraction——'

'What rubbish! who does *not* admire them?' broke in their proprietress viciously.

'Nay, I only meant that some persons have a greater passion for precious stones than others—have less taste than others, if you will have it so; but however universal may be the admiration of them, very few persons have the money to buy them, and especially such specimens as those of which you speak. Their worth in a practical sense must therefore depend upon the existence of an exceptional purchaser.'

Lady Pargiter drummed with her fingers upon the cuckoo clock with a vehemence that would have alarmed that imprisoned bird had he not been made of sapphires. 'It seems very difficult,' she said, 'to get a plain answer to a plain question. Well, supposing the existence of such a purchaser, would twenty-five thousand pounds, at the

present price of diamonds, be too much to ask him?’

‘Not perhaps too much to *ask* him, madam,’ returned Matthew drily. ‘In the case, however, of such a costly article, we generally find some sort of compromise to be necessary. However, here is Mr. Signet, who will be able to give you much better information than I can on such a topic.’

‘Sorry I have kept you waiting, Lady Pargiter,’ said the jeweller, entering with an apologetic smile. ‘Have you shown her ladyship the cuckoo, Helston?’ (for her hand was still upon the clock, and he thought she might have taken a fancy to it). ‘That bird is a marvel.’

‘I am not come about any such trifle,’ returned Lady Pargiter haughtily. ‘My call is upon a matter of great importance—in connection with my diamonds.’

‘They are all right, I conclude, Mr. Helston?’ inquired the jeweller sharply, but by no means so sharply as of yore: ever since his visit to Cavendish Grove, his be-

haviour to his assistant had been much more gracious; for a reason which Matthew suspected, and which, I am sorry to say, made him dislike that gentleman even more cordially than before.

‘I have no doubt they are all right, as you call it,’ observed Lady Pargiter, severely; ‘my object in coming here, Mr. Signet, is to know at what price you value them.’

‘What price? Dear me! do I understand that you wish to part with them?’

‘I don’t say that at all, sir; I only want to know for a particular reason of my own, how much I could get for them if I did wish it.’

‘Well, my lady, that is a serious question to answer, so to speak, right off the reel. If there was any very wealthy personage at present looking out for such a *parure*, there is no knowing what he might give; but we might wait for years and years for such a customer.’

‘You know of no such person, then, at present?’

‘No, my lady.’

‘Well, if you were to buy them yourself, to what price would you be prepared to go? I apply to you because you are acquainted with their history and all about them; you were consulted about them, if I remember right, by my late father.’

‘Yes, my lady, yes. Some years before his death, we endeavoured to come to some sort of arrangement with him: but he asked too much—a great deal too much. The diamonds are very fine ones, no doubt: I examined them on that occasion very minutely: but trade is no better now than at that time; rather worse. We could make no advance, I fear, upon our then offer.’

‘And what was that?’

‘It was fifteen thousand pounds.’

‘Fifteen thousand fiddle-sticks!’ exclaimed Lady Pargiter. ‘Why, this person here—your assistant—has just confessed to me that they are worth twenty-five thousand pounds.’

‘Excuse me, madam,’ observed Matthew;

'you asked me whether that sum would be too much to ask for them of an intending purchaser, who was, moreover, exceptionally wealthy: if you remember, I declined to say what they were worth, and for the best of reasons, because I did not know.'

'Well, your story, at all events, and Mr. Signet's, are very different,' returned her ladyship, angrily. 'Fifteen thousand pounds, indeed! Why, then, do you suppose my poor father made me pay probate duty upon nearly twice as much for them?'

It was quite true that the late Mr. Ingot had specified the diamonds in ~~his~~ will as being worth twenty-five thousand pounds—a circumstance which had always astonished Mr. Signet. For although that might have been their value in the testator's eyes, he was not the man to have swelled the revenue of his country at the expense of his own flesh and blood, unless compelled to do so. If, on the other hand, he felt the jewels could never be disposed of at anything like their just value—and since, moreover, he knew

there could be no necessity for his daughter's parting with them—it was rather a good plan than otherwise to have estimated them so highly, though she had to pay for it ; since that very fact to a great extent established their value, and added another attraction to her in the matrimonial market.

It was rather difficult, however, for Mr. Signet to explain these views to Lady Pargiter herself ; so he confined himself to saying that he supposed it was the late Mr. Ingot's stern sense of duty which had caused him to value the diamonds for probate duty at what he considered their just worth.

‘ And yet you who know that,’ answered Lady Pargiter, ‘ and who for your own purposes—that is, to obtain more money for their custody—have always valued them at the same price, when I come to say, “ What will you give for them?” reply, “ Fifteen thousand pounds.” You expect to make ten thousand by the transaction. Talk of usury ! I consider your conduct most discreditable.’ And with that her ladyship drew her train

through her arm with a jerk (for she was not going to sweep such a man's floor for him), and walked out of Mr. Signet's establishment.

'Well, I never!' exclaimed the indignant jeweller; 'she, the daughter of old Ingot, to dare to talk to me of usury! Of all the vile, cantankerous, grasping women that I have met with in my whole experience, that Lady Pargiter is certainly the worst.'

'Well, after to-day, I suppose we shall see no more of her,' observed Matthew, with a sigh of relief.

'More of her? Of course we shall see more of her. For some reason or other, she wants to sell her diamonds; and as she won't like to go to any other house in the trade about them, she'll be here again to-morrow; she will find money a little tighter by that time. Usury, indeed!—I'll pay her out—so help me Pluto.'

This was a professional way Mr. Signet had of swearing: his impression in so doing was that he was appealing to the God of

Riches, who might very well be supposed to be the guardian divinity of a gentleman of his calling; his mistake, however, was only in the letter, not in the spirit, for what he thus swore he always stuck to. Some cynics say that, though the worm will turn if trodden on, he will not turn if you tread on him again and pretty smartly; but socially this is an error. Not even the Lady Pargiters of the earth can afford to be offensive to their fellow-creatures. Moreover, that great firm of jewellers which had its embodiment in the person of Mr. Signet was not a worm, except generically—just as a boa-constrictor may be called a worm.

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CHAPTER XIII.

CEDAR VILLA.

IN these gross, material days, it is the fashion to say, and perhaps to believe, that self-interest is at the bottom of everything; but if so, it is, in many cases, so far down that there is no seeing where it lies; and it is certain that there are other factors, at least equally powerful, which affect our social relations with one another. With respect to Matthew Helston and his employer, for example, it was a curious fact that their common dislike to Lady Pargiter drew them nearer together than their common interests had ever been able to do. Her ladyship had not returned to Mr. Signet's establishment as he had predicted, and that failure in prophecy as well as of justice (since he had consequently been unable to 'pay her out')

for her insolence in the manner proposed) had greatly embittered that gentleman against her; while his own occasional though infrequent errands to Moor Street kept Matthew's wrath quite sufficiently warm. They were more hateful to him than ever, since his wife's condition was becoming a greater source of anxiety to him, and he was the more loath to leave her at such untimely hours. What, on the other hand, tended to set Matthew against the jeweller was the latter's obvious desire to establish himself on a footing of some intimacy in Cavendish Grove. Uncle Stephen's arguments had succeeded to some extent in setting at rest his nephew's suspicions of Mr. Signet's motives in presenting the agate ring; but he could not understand 'why the man should be always calling at No. 7.'

This was a little unreasonable, since 'the man' had only called twice: once in order to leave his card after dining there, and once to leave a bouquet for Mrs. Helston. The supposition, it was true, in the latter case was

that the bouquet had been meant for Amy, and that, since that young lady was from home—being engaged as usual in her professional duties—he had been compelled to present it to her sister.

Then on the top of that had come an invitation to the whole family to spend ‘a long day’ at his villa on the Thames.

The season for such enjoyments was almost over, but a few days of that ‘Indian summer’ which occasionally visits our shores happened to be with us, and Mr. Signet had expressed a very cordial hope that his friends in Cavendish Grove would take advantage of it. The proposal was submitted to some discussion among the little party, and was strongly opposed by Matthew; but on the whole they were in favour of accepting the invitation. Amy, indeed, had suggested that she should stop at home, a plan much approved of by her brother-in-law; but, on the other hand, in the present state of Sabey’s health, she was unwilling that her sister should be deprived of her society, while

Uncle Stephen, in his humorous way, had pronounced such a design as out of the question. 'I have heard of Hamlet being performed without the Prince,' he said, 'but without Ophelia never. A pretty sort of reception we should get at Mr. Signet's, if we came without you!'

Mr. Barlow, too, who had received the news of that present of the ring with much good humour, and a complete indifference to the motives of the giver, arising from his own sense of security, strongly advocated the acceptance by the whole party of Mr. Signet's offer. 'It will be a very pleasant experience, and the little outing will do your sister good, Amy,' was what he had said to his beloved object, and his words, of course, had had weight with her. She had never herself thought Mr. Signet had 'meant anything,' and somewhat resented the view her people had taken of his attentions; and perhaps she expected that their host's behaviour on this occasion would show their suspicions to be baseless. There was not a grain of coquetry

in her disposition ; she did not use any arguments, even to herself, as some of her sex would have done, respecting this man ' old enough to be her father,' and the bare idea of whose making love to her was a joke : she would **not** have thought it a joke, had she credited it at all, and she put down what **had** happened to the honest desire of Mr. Signet to make himself pleasant to the family, and to his ignorance of how to set about it.

I am afraid that, on the contrary, the whole affair tickled Uncle Stephen's sense of humour vastly. Of all Mr. Signet's guests, he would have been the one who looked forward to getting most entertainment out of the expedition, had not a circumstance occurred at the very outset of it which caused a change of views, or, in other words, ' put his back up.' A messenger arrived at No. 7 from Mr. Signet a few hours before they were to start, offering the use of his carriage, ' which might be more convenient for the ladies.'

However well-meant this offer might be, Mr. Durham felt it to be 'an overt act' of patronage on the part of their host, or, as he more curtly expressed it, 'just like his infernal impudence.' Mr. Durham had bespoken a waggonette for the excursion, which would accommodate them very well, and he wrote back to say so; he thanked Mr. Signet for his consideration, but the time was too short to alter their arrangements. But the mischief had been done. The old recluse had been put in that antagonistic frame of mind with respect to their host of which on the former occasion Amy had been apprehensive. He said to himself, 'This fellow would have sent his carriage for Amy, in order that she may know by experience how nice it would be to have one at her own disposal;' but in reality he was annoyed upon his own account. It may seem strange that Mr. Signet, who had so much *amour propre* himself, did not recognise the danger of wounding it in the case of other people; but unhappily his

case is not exceptional. And of course he suffered for it.

Cedar Villa, so called from a splendid specimen of that tree which overshadowed half the lawn, was really a charming residence in the summer months; in winter, of course, like all other river-side houses, it was damp and dreary; but, with the sun on it, lighting up the cheerful rooms, with their open French windows, and reflecting the glitter of the stream that flowed beneath them, it was bright and pleasant enough. The furniture was a little showy, perhaps, and the walls and ceilings had a somewhat too liberal allowance of gilt on them, but there was really nothing to justify Mr. Durham's reflection that the villa looked like a branch establishment of the house in Paulet Street.

The ladies praised it honestly and without stint, to the branch-proprietor's great content.

'Yes,' said he, 'for a mere tradesman, like myself, it is a nice place enough—one

is almost tempted, from the possession of it, to imagine oneself a person of importance.'

If Mr. Signet expected anyone to observe on this that he *was* a person of importance, he was doomed to disappointment.

'After all,' he continued, with that eagerness which, with some folks, generally follows a remark that has fallen flat—just as the marksman who has once missed the target is liable to be 'wild' as well as 'wide'—'everything depends upon how one chooses to look at it.'

'True,' said Mr. Durham drily; 'that was what caused the great lord in Spain always to eat cherries with his spectacles on; he protested it made them bigger and more nourishing.'

'That reminds me,' observed the host, 'that there is a little fruit in the summer-house, if you would like to partake of it.'

'Oh, how nice!' exclaimed Sabey, clasping her hands. 'I have not been in a summer-house since we left dear old Tarlton.'

The bower she was thinking of was a rather sombre, tumble-down affair, lined with fir-cones and hung with cobwebs, in the walled garden at the Rectory: in the evening, much in the occupation of bats; but besides the cobwebs, it had certain tender memories clinging to it of girlhood and careless hours that endeared it to her simple nature. It was, therefore, rather a disappointment to her than otherwise that the summer-house at Cedar Villa was of quite another kind: a spick-and-span erection of coloured glass, with a marble table, on which, instead of the tea and cake eaten for a treat on half-holidays, there were grapes and pineapples—the products, as their host explained, of his own green-houses. ‘But I am sorry to say,’ he added, with a smile, ‘no cheaper upon that account.’

Before them stretched a long broad wooden terrace, called a camp-shed, and beneath them a flight of steps ran down to the river, from which the silver splash of oars and pleasant laughter of the passengers

on that miscalled 'silent highway' was borne to them by obedient breezes that, having done their mission, seemed to faint and die.

'This is very pretty,' observed Mr. Durham frankly.

'It is perfect Paradise,' sighed Amy, enchanted by the brilliant river scene, so different from the sluggish Lat.

'It is a Paradise that can very seldom boast of such Peris as honour it to-day,' said Mr. Signet gallantly. 'A few bachelor friends come down here occasionally and defile the place with smoke—otherwise I live a hermit's life.'

'But not on hermit's fare,' laughed Sabey.

'On little better, I do assure you, madam. However, I hope my cook will presently make an effort for an occasion so extraordinary. After all, there is nothing like Nature : she cannot be imitated.'

Mr. Durham, tickled with a recollection of how iridescence in false stones was produced by fluoric acid, began to laugh.

‘What are you laughing at, Uncle Stephen?’ inquired Sabey.

‘Did I laugh? I was thinking of what Mr. Signet says about imitating Nature: it is quite true. The German Casper tells us that the pistol so often put into the hand of a murdered man to simulate suicide is trouble thrown away: in genuine cases it is always found spasmodically grasped.’

‘My dear Mr. Durham, how can you talk of such things?’ cried Amy reproachfully.

‘It was doubtless suggested by the sense of contrast,’ he answered. ‘Everything here speaks of life and light. The human mind resents impressions too forcibly presented to it, and flies to their contraries.’

‘I suppose that is why, while sitting in this palatial spot, my mind is reverting to the arbour at Tarlton,’ said Sabey, smiling. ‘You remember the old arbour, as we used to call it, Matt?’

‘Can I ever forget it, darling?’ said Matthew tenderly;—‘though I think it

rather hard upon the old place to bring it into such comparison.'

'It's a queer thing is memory,' observed Mr. Signet, with a philosophic air. 'There is no such thing as forgetting.'

'Duvergier tells us a strange thing in physical exemplification of that,' remarked Uncle Stephen. 'He states that when the brand-mark of a galley-slave has vanished through lapse of years, it may be recalled to *sight* by slapping the neighbourhood of the spot with the flat of the hand till it reddens; when the brand-mark, which cannot redden, at once becomes visible by its whiteness. The mere materials of which our human house is made are much less perishable than is generally supposed. Our bones are recognisable for many generations after they have been laid in the grave. Those of King Dagobert, when dug up in the church of St. Denis, were found well-preserved after four hundred years. Hubler avers that he procured gelatine from the bones of a mummy two thousand years old; and Orfila confirms

this, inasmuch as he got twenty-seven per cent. of it by boiling some six hundred years old.'

'Curious, but not festive,' observed Mr. Signet, making a wry face.

'No, indeed,' said Amy. 'I think you may well be pardoned for not appreciating Mr. Durham's taste for the grotesque and terrible.'

'That is ungrateful, for I don't know anyone who enjoys a shocking story as much as you, Amy,' said Uncle Stephen reproachfully.

Mr. Signet looked at her with astonished but admiring eyes, and was silent. Perhaps he was searching his mind for a shocking story with which to regale her ears. If so, it was fortunate that, before he found it, an even pulse of oars was heard to beat, and a galley with four rowers shot up to the bottom step of the river flight. It had cushions arranged for five persons in the stern, above which was a striped canopy, to shield its tenants from the sun.

‘Though you wouldn’t come in my carriage, I venture to hope you will patronise my gig,’ said Mr. Signet, pointing to the gallant galley. ‘A row on the water before dinner is much recommended by the faculty.’

There was a mixture of simplicity and cunning, of pomposity and feeble drollery, of melancholy result and good intention, in all that Mr. Signet did and said that day, which would have ensured an interest in him in any student of human nature. It has been said that whoever has an honest wish to make himself agreeable to his fellow-creatures must needs succeed—a consoling theory, which, however, even if it were true, would by no means make everybody pleasant. But I fear it smacks of optimism.

Mr. Signet was much too wise to take an oar: he had a conviction—which it is a pity is not more general—that the spectacle of a gentleman in his shirt-sleeves, verging on corpulence, and more than middle-aged, toiling at the oar is not an agreeable one.

To sit and steer, on the contrary, if you make no spasmodic attempt to adapt yourself to the motion of the boat, is a situation of dignity. On his right was Sabey, on his left was Amy, and his conversation was divided between them, though not, it must be confessed, in equal proportions. To the latter he made remarks in a low voice upon the beauties of the scenery, and consulted her wishes as to their course. At her instigation he landed the party on a wooded island, which they explored. 'The islands in these parts,' he said, 'are called eyots, which I don't think you can spell, Miss Thurlow.'

When she answered this challenge, and correctly, he expressed his wonder.

'You forget,' she said, 'that it is my calling to teach young folks to spell.'

'To be sure,' he replied tenderly, and sighed. By the sigh he meant her to understand that so much beauty and intelligence was utterly thrown away on such a career ; and by the tenderness of his tone he implied

that there was one, if she only knew it, who had both the will and the power to emancipate her from it.

For the first time Amy began to think that her people were right in their ridiculous suspicions of Mr. Signet ; and she pitied him a little, though the pity was by no means of the sort which is akin to love. Once more afloat, he steered into a bed of water-lilies, and invited her to gather some.

‘They are the prettiest ornaments for the dinner-table you can imagine,’ he said ; ‘and we need no gardeners for them hereabouts.’

This was clever of him, for he was thinking of quite another sort of ornament. He knew she would have to take off her glove to pluck them, and he wished to see whether she wore his agate ring or not. As it happened, she had put it on that morning—not without some doubt—out of compliment to him, and his beady eyes shone brighter than ever as they fell upon it. It was impossible now for her to doubt that after that his

attentions to her became very marked. She became rather miserable in consequence, and her serious face and manner encouraged his hopes. He had had the sagacity to supply his two male guests with very large and excellent cigars, and, under cover of their smoke, or, rather, of the drowsiness inspired by the divine weed, he carried on his advances without exciting their notice. But Sabey, of course, saw everything, and trembled lest Matthew should also see. It is strange, but true, that a man may make love to a woman without her knowing it; but not in the presence of another woman without *her* knowing it; in this case, however, and by this time, they both knew it, and grievously repented that they had ever come to Cedar Villa.

After they had had their water-lounge—which, we may be sure, included a visit to a lock, in the cool delicious depths of which the sisters sang a song together, which Mr. Signet christened ‘the Duet of the Sirens’—they went in to dinner. This was really an

Apician meal, though not, as Uncle Stephen had wickedly anticipated, served on gold plate hall-marked. The centre of the table was a looking-glass, on which fresh water-lilies were disposed, as though lying on their native element.

‘We have to thank you for *these*, Miss Thurlow,’ said the host, smiling—which, as there were about fifty lilies, and she had gathered, perhaps, half-a-dozen, was a gallantry indulged in somewhat at the expense of truth. The ladies were not very talkative, having thoughts of their own as to the consequences of a certain disappointment that even modest Amy was now convinced was about to befall her too tender host; but Matthew, deriving satisfaction from the reflection that this day of pleasure was nearly over, made several conversational efforts, while Mr. Durham, whose weakness was good cheer, became quite eloquent under its influence.

A propos of the dainties set before him, he told of that famous epicure of the last

century who had plovers' eggs brought from St. Malo by special messengers, paid fifty guineas for two dishes, and, on the whole, contrived to spend 150,000*l.* upon his palate.

The reminiscence was not only a sort of compliment to the host, but delighted him, because it dealt with large sums of money. 'The gentleman,' he observed, 'must have had an enormous income.'

'He would have had a very good one,' remarked Uncle Stephen, 'only he lived upon his principal. His appreciation of what was good, however, remained to the last—as the moralists tell us it always should do. In the end he was ruined. A friend of mine once gave him a guinea to keep him from starving, and two hours afterwards found him dressing an ortolan with his own hands. Eventually, when he had nothing to eat but the commonest things, he put an end to his existence.'

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Mr. Signet, wiping his forehead; for Mr. Durham's stories—culled as they were from all sorts

of far-back experiences or old-world reading —were somewhat too strong meat for him.

Half in reparation, perhaps, or from a feeling of gratitude for having so nobly dined, Uncle Stephen, striking a more sympathetic chord, regaled his host with Pliny's description of turquoise-hunting in Carmania, where the stone protrudes from the surface of the precipitous rocks like a blue eye, and is struck off with slings and stones, just as boys in England knock down walnuts from the tree.

Mr. Signet's admiration for this game (of which he had never heard) was expressed without stint ; but when his omniscient guest began to quote Theophrastus in connection with the fecundity of the diamond, he grew even more excited. That precious stones were technically termed ' male ' and ' female,' in consequence of certain variations in their brilliancy, he was, of course, aware ; but that they were self-producing was news to him, and seemed to open a vista.

It was true that Mr. Signet, in common

with other and wiser folks, was not always quite certain when Mr. Durham was in jest or earnest, but he had great confidence in his learning, and his own opinion of human nature was too high to permit him to suppose that any man of parts and principle would speak jocosely upon diamonds—whether in an interesting condition or not.

On the whole, and notwithstanding that matters had promised so ill at starting, Mr. Durham increased the favourable impression he had already made upon Mr. Signet. All his guests, indeed, would have left that gentleman in a state of much content and satisfaction, but for a word dropped by Matthew while the ladies had gone to put their cloaks and bonnets on, in readiness for the drive home, and Uncle Stephen was struggling into his great-coat in the hall.

It was in answer to a somewhat pressing invitation from his host that the whole party should repeat their visit on the Saturday—that day week—if the fine weather should still hold.

‘I am sorry to say that is impossible,’ said Matthew, ‘for we have a long-standing invitation to dine at the Crystal Palace with Mr. Barlow on that day.’

‘Pooh! put him off, and come to me,’ replied Mr. Signet, with some impatience. ‘Any day will do for the Crystal Palace.’

‘Yes, but any day won’t do for Mr. Barlow,’ said Matthew, smiling; ‘he is a very busy man.’

‘And who *is* Mr. Barlow?’ inquired Mr. Signet, in a tone that seemed to add, ‘no such individual should be permitted to interfere with any plans of mine.’

‘He is a young lawyer, to whom my sister-in-law, Amy, is engaged to be married.’

‘Indeed!’ said Mr. Signet, in a manner very creditable to his self-control. ‘That is very unexpected news to me, Mr. Helston.’

‘Hullo, what has happened?’ inquired Uncle Stephen, entering the room equipped for travel, and perceiving the gravity that sat upon the brow of his host.

‘It is nothing,’ said Matthew; ‘only Mr.

Signet is disappointed that we cannot repeat our pleasant visit to him next Saturday.'

'It is very unexpected,' said Mr. Signet, mechanically.

'My dear sir, everything is unexpected,' said Uncle Stephen, who always became more philosophic, and, if possible, more full of anecdote, after dinner. 'I remember a very striking instance of that which Southey tells. A murderer is made to touch his victim's face: no blood follows, or miracle, as was looked for, occurs to criminate him; but, being left alone with the body, the dead man lifts up his head and looks at him, which compels his confession.'

For a few moments Mr. Signet's face had turned to such a livid paleness that he might have been almost the subject (*i.e.* the dead one) of this story himself; but his colour soon returned, and it was in his usual confident tone that he replied, 'I agree with you, Mr. Durham: things often turn out quite differently from what is expected. Well, if not Saturday, then I hope some

other day may be found suitable, Mr. Helston.'

Matthew had never felt so kindly towards his employer as at that moment. He felt that his news had been a great disappointment to him (however ridiculous might have been his aspirations), and he had borne it like a man. He did not understand that his hopes had been dashed only for a moment, to revive and assert themselves all the more strongly now that there were obstacles. The very motto of a jeweller is, or should be, 'Patience'; and the surviving partner of Messrs. Star and Signet had had much too long an experience of the advantage of that policy to have taken a first refusal as final, even had it come from the lips of the principal—namely, Miss Amy Thurlow herself—in place of those of her brother-in-law.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE 'RISING SUN.'

AMONG the many industries that languish during the winter months—though, like the sleep of the dormouse, without suggesting any great public catastrophe even in case it should never revive again—is that of the Turf tout. When the season of 'trials' is over, no longer does he lie concealed in the blooming gorse, apprehensive of the horse-whip, or note-book in hand, listen to the 'seven-stun jock' as he indiscreetly prattles of how the Sister to Cunigonda took her 'gallop' that morning 'in her clothes;' he leaves the thymy down, the springing turf, the carol of the very earliest lark, the breezy call of incense-breathing morn, and becomes—it is the nearest approach, perhaps, to his romantic summer life of which circumstances

permit—the deputy waterman to a London cabstand. In most cases such as that of Dick Dartmoor, the neighbouring public-house affords him some supplementary income ; he is its *commissionaire*, or odd man, and ready for any office of general utility, whether it be to summon soft music in the persons of a band of nigger minstrels, or to expel by force of arms (and legs) any guest who has taken more than is good for him—or rather, for the good of the house.

Besides these two appointments, Dick Dartmoor had a vested interest in the fashionable arrivals and departures in the neighbourhood ; whenever a cab, as often happened, was sent for from Hybla Mews, he would accompany it to the residence of the hirer in a sort of *ex-officio* capacity, and insist upon being employed to carry down luggage to the vehicle, at a sliding tariff of charges which varied, according to the determination of character of the involuntary employer, from sixpence a parcel to a pint of ale in all. There had been a time in

Dick's hot youth when, in the late autumn, he would hang on the outskirts of the London railway stations, and, fixing his eye upon some cab laden with Paterfamilias' luggage from the seaside, would gird up his loins and run it down to its destination, on the chance of being paid for assisting to unload it. Of course, like marriage, it was a mere lottery, but with more excitement and even desperation about it; for to thread crowded streets, as well as cross them, at six miles an hour, with the gaze fixed upon a quick-going 'four-wheel,' is trying to the nerves. The prize, of course, was a short journey and lavish payment. The blanks (which were more numerous) were excursions to the extreme suburbs, and an observation from Paterfamilias at the end of them to the effect that he wanted no extraneous assistance, or even an irritable reference to the nearest policeman.

But these delights had long ceased for Dick: his breath was far too short for such expeditions; and his lost strength had but a

poor substitute in the subtlety that enabled him to select all the lighter packages and to leave the trunks and boxes to the more Atlantean shoulders of the cabman. Indeed, in the secret history of this poor fellow there was a blank, or interregnum, of at least two years, which he had spent in much harder labour than has been described, in consequence of his having taken an article straight from a cab to a pawnbroker's, and disposed of it for what it would fetch. Far be it from me to say that Dick's *morale* had been injured by this experience; I would not for any money make a reflection so injurious upon the society and discipline of Her Majesty's prisons as that suggestion would imply; but it had done Dick no good. He came out of gaol—just as many people come out of church—neither the better nor the worse for it; but it had introduced him to some queer companions, the existence of whom was unknown to the proprietor of the 'Rising Sun,' or he would, perhaps, have trusted Dick even less than he did—which was not much

farther than the public bar of his establishment.

For the most part, Dick stood outside its swinging doors, like the Peri at the gate of Paradise, looking very dry and wistful, and with a straw in his mouth. But all of a sudden there came a change for the better in Dick that surprised everybody and most astounded those who knew him best. He appeared one morning in November at the 'Rising Sun' without his haybands, and in a complete suit of second-hand clothes. To say that the neighbourhood of Hybla Mews was 'thrown into a state of intense excitement' (as it would have been over a mere murder) is much to underrate the effect of this phenomenon. Ingenuity was taxed to the uttermost to account for it. The landlord, who was a wit—and suffered for it in slenderness of custom—declared that Dick's aunt must have died and left him a million of money. The idea of such a sum in connection with Mr. Dartmoor was humorous enough, but nothing in comparison with the suggestion

of his having possessed a female relative ; he had notoriously never had a mother—a father, of course, was out of the question—and much less an aunt ; nor could the *Heralds' College* itself have traced relationship for him with any member of the human family. He was as much a waif and stray, poor wretch, as the straw in his own mouth. Another, but scarcely a wilder, theory was that Dick had drawn a prize in the great *Hamburg Lottery* (of which a prospectus had once been dropped in the bar-room), and was the proprietor of a castle on the *Rhine*, with its feudal rights ; while a third and the most popular solution of the problem was that he had lamed some 'public favourite' in his stable at a crisis, and had been munificently rewarded for that service by a grateful employer.

To all these suggestions, which were made with much frankness in Dick's presence, he only returned a cunning look and a wink of his left eye. His eyes, which, perhaps, had once been bright enough, had

now the appearance of having been boiled, whereas the rest of his countenance bore obvious traces of the oven. It had been baked just as the faces of ladies of fashion are said to be during the operation of enamel; only in Dick's case it was, of course, by some process of nature and not of art, and certainly with no view to being made 'beautiful for ever.' Dick had been always plain, not to say repulsive, to look at, but in his second-hand clothes he looked infinitely worse than ever. So incongruous was their effect, that the youngest policeman in the force would have said 'he has stole 'em,' while the student of human nature would not have hesitated to add, 'after having murdered, under circumstances of peculiar atrocity, their original proprietor.'

Perhaps it was that the inhabitants of Hybla Mews were neither students of human nature nor policemen, or it possibly may have been because Mr. Dartmoor had not only clothes but money in the pockets of them, that the opinions of his neighbours were much

more charitable. Some of them even began to remember that they had always thought there was something sterling about Dick (which there never had been in any sense), and had prophesied his rise in the world. To do Mr. John Rutherford justice, he was not among these blind admirers of success ; but, on the other hand, he accepted its results so far as to drink with Mr. Dartmoor whenever that gentleman asked him so to do, and these invitations had of late become frequent.

Mrs. Rutherford observed with alarm these visits of her husband to the 'Rising Sun,' and she distrusted his new-found host even more than she disliked his hospitalities ; but in trivial matters, such as beer and purl—which is gin and beer—'honest John' took his own way and disregarded counsel.

One evening in November Mr. Richard Dartmoor pushed his liberality to the verge of profuseness by inviting Mr. Rutherford to supper at the 'Rising Sun.' The entertainment was given in the 'private room,' an

apartment cut off from the bar by a wooden partition that reached nearly to the ceiling, and which was reserved for visitors of distinction. Although John was his only guest, the repast was not only plentiful but magnificent. There was soup, in the form of tripe; calves' liver by way of *entrée*, and for the *pièce de résistance* a bullock's heart. His guest was fond of what he was wont generically to describe as 'innerds,' and Dick had consulted his taste. 'Sweets' were rather disregarded by the *habitués* of the establishment, but its *chef* had a way of stewing whelks that was considered perfection, and on this occasion he outdid himself. After the whelks the happy pair applied themselves to whisky, tobacco, and conversation upon the topics of the day. After an exhaustive discourse upon the merits of Artemis, the question arose as to what sum her 'stable' was likely to net by her if she should 'pull off' the great stake; and from that the talk naturally glided to pecuniary matters in general.

‘It’s a great thing, let me tell you, Mr. Rutherford,’ said Dick, stretching out his legs and thrusting his hands into his pockets—which was now a favourite trick with him : it pleased him to find they didn’t come through—‘it’s a great thing to have a hatful of money.’

‘I have no doubt of it whatever,’ answered his companion, expelling a huge column of smoke, and watching it rise to the ceiling with much apparent interest. ‘As for myself, I have often had the hat, but never the shiners.’

‘Well, I *have*,’ returned Dick. Here he leant forward and added in a mysterious whisper, ‘Now, what would you say if I said I had a matter of—well, I won’t say how much—to do as I like with?’

‘If you don’t tell me how much, how can I know what to say?’ answered John, not disputatively, but with the quiet air of a man who feels that logic is on his side.

‘Anyhow, I’m rich, Rutherford—that is, as compared with what I was. That’s some-

thing, ain't it? Now, what do you say to *that?*'

'Well,' replied John, wishing to be polite, and certainly to avoid giving expression to any uncomplimentary surmises upon this point, 'I say it's a rum go.'

'Yes, it is, Mr. Rutherford; and what makes it a still rummer go is this, that I have the power of making things very comfortable for somebody else—let us say yourself, for instance.'

'Well, you've done it,' said John, waving his hand round the apartment in which the fragrant stuffing of the bullock's heart still mingled with the aroma of the whisky: 'you have made me most uncommon comfortable.'

'Pooh! that's nothing, man,' returned the other contemptuously, 'to what I *can* do for you, and what I mean to do, if you only show a grain of gumption.'

'Ah, that depends,' replied John, either from natural modesty, or from the remembrance that the sagacious Sally had often denied to him the quality alluded to.

‘To begin with, there’s a five-pound note, my man, which I have been told to hand over to you by one the colour of whose money you have seen already.’

John took the note—not without some excitement—and held it up against the light of the two candles which graced the board.

‘The water-mark seems all right,’ he said.

‘Of course it’s right; everything is right as the Capting does, you may take your oath; he’s a gentleman, he is, every inch.’

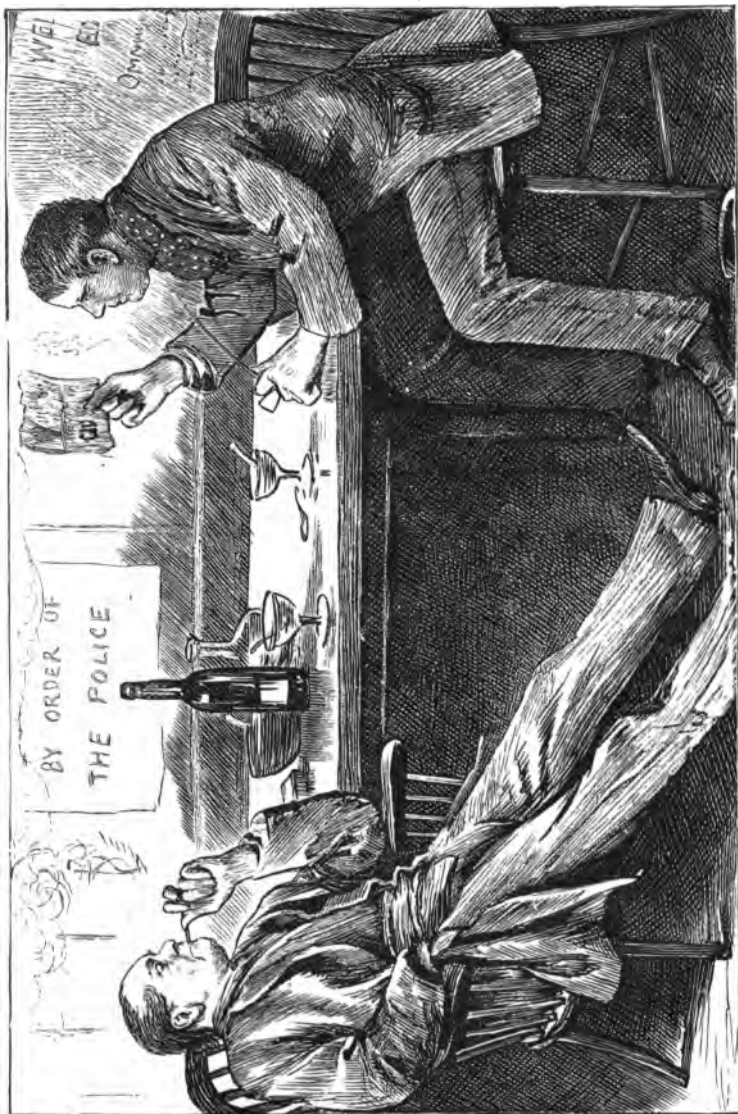
‘It seems so, indeed,’ said John, assentingly, after having quite satisfied himself of the genuineness of the article in question.

‘And what am I to do for this pretty bit of flimsy?’

‘Nothin’,’ said Dick, triumphantly, and crossing his legs; ‘it’s yourn for good and all: and no questions asked.’

‘Then tell the Captin, with my love,’ said John, putting the note in his pocket, ‘that I shall be happy to do the same work for him on the same terms as long as he lives.’

‘Ah, well, it won’t be quite that,’ re-



'There's a five pound note, my man.'

turned Dick ; 'but it is very little more in the way of work, and it will be a very great deal more in the way of wage.'

'How much ?' inquired the other.

'A matter of a hundred pounds.'

'That's a long figure,' observed Mr. Rutherford, blowing not only the smoke but a considerable quantity of the air of his lungs into space.

'Yes, and the money down,' continued Mr. Dartmoor ; 'none of your promises to pay, nor bills, nor such-like, but twenty notes like that, paid into the palm of your 'and !'

Mr. Rutherford looked at his hand, as if in some doubt as to whether it was a fit receptacle for such a sum. 'And the work, Mr. Dartmoor ?' said he, after a long pause. 'What is the trifling service as I am expected to do for the Captin for that wage ?'

'It's merely to stop your keb in a certain place, and then drive on again.'

'Then I'll take the mare out—because she's a jibber, and will do it forty times and

think nothing of it,' replied John, cheerfully. 'You may count on that little matter as settled.'

'Now, don't be a fool, Rutherford; be serious,' argued Dick, with some irritation. 'It's not a joking matter, let me tell you, nor anything like it.'

'I beg your pardin,' said honest John with gravity. 'I thought, from what you said about the thing being so very trifling, that it *was* a bit of a joke. It ain't thieving, is it?'

'Hush—h!' said Dick, holding up his finger, and glancing apprehensively towards the top of the wooden partition; 'don't never use such words as that. Do you think I'd ask an honest man like you to do anything agin the law? I've too much regard for you, Mr. Rutherford—and for your missus.'

'I'll tell her,' said John, 'what you so kindly say, and likewise all about it.'

'What! You would not be such a fool as that, surely?' exclaimed Dick in unmis-

takable alarm. 'Why, that fi'-pound-note was give you in order, whatsumever happened, and whether you proved game or not, as you was to be mum about it.'

'Then there *was* a little work to do for it, after all, Mr. Dartmoor, if it was but to hold my tongue?' observed John, with the air of a discoverer. 'Well, that ain't easy work for some people—but fortunately it is for me. I'll never say a word, I promise you, whatever happens.'

'I know'd it, Rutherford; I know'd you were a right good fellow,' said Dick, soothingly. 'Now, the fact is this: we wants you to help us in a little bit of fun—that's the best way to put it—in a little bit of fun—with Mr. Helston.'

'Ah, indeed!' said John. 'What ladies and genelman call a practical joke, eh?'

'Just so, old fellow. The Capting knows Mr. Helston; is, indeed, a sort of friend of his; so, you see, it's all upon the square. You drives him o' nights to Moor Street, now and then, don't you?'

‘Yes, I drives him to Moor Street.’

‘And on again, after that, to Paulet Street?’

‘I does.’

‘Between them streets, and not much out of your way, lies Grain Place, don’t it—a very quiet sort of spot?’

‘Grain Place? And “not much out of my way,”’ returned the other, musingly. ‘Well, if it was a hordinary fare, Mr. Dartmoor, as was going between Moor Street and Paulet Street, and wanted to call in Grain Place, I should stick on somethin’ extra.’

‘Of course you would, Mr. Rutherford. Still, as a matter of fact, it ain’t out of the way—it’s *in* the way.’

‘Well, yes, I have druv through it occasionally,’ admitted John, ‘on these very trips.’

‘Just so. Now the next time you go to Moor Street, after having given me the office—I mean as to which night it will be—just you stop in Grain Place on your road to the City. I’ll give you the number of the house another time.’

'And what am I to do when I do stop ?'

'Nothin'. Everything will be done by other people. There will be some friends of Mr. Helston waiting for him there.'

'And for what he has got with him in the keb, I suppose ?' suggested Mr. Rutherford slowly.

'Perhaps; that's neither here nor there. You've got nothing to do with *that*. It's a dark night; the snow is falling, perhaps; your horse falls lame, or you fancy he does, just opposite that very 'ouse—it's merely a coincidence. Your fare suddenly finds himself in the hands of his friends, and he goes indoors with them to make a night of it. What have you got to do with that? Nothing. You have only to stop your keb in a certain place—and then go on again. And you will be paid a hundred pounds.'

'And you think that story will satisfy the police, do you, when Mr. Matthew Helston is missing, and they come to me to make inquiries?' inquired Mr. Rutherford, sucking at his pipe, as his custom was when deeply

moved, and staring fixedly at his interlocutor. 'It seems to me that I shall be the first one took up.'

'Why, what had *you* to do with it? You will say that Mr. Helston went in of his own accord, like, into the house in Grain Place, and of course you did not notice the number.'

'It's too risky by half, Mr. Dartmoor.'

'It's not: there's not a hap'orth of risk about it. Just turn it over in your mind.'

There was silence for a moment or two, during which Mr. Rutherford gave himself up to reflection. 'And when he comes out,' he resumed grimly, 'when Mr. Helston comes out, do you think my story about his having gone into the house of his own free-will will shape with his?'

'He never will come out—that is,' added Mr. Dartmoor, perceiving the other to draw his legs in rather quickly, 'not to harm *you*. He will never be let out till he promises that; and, as I've heard you say, he's a man of his word.'

'Yes, Dick,' observed Mr. Rutherford, speaking with great gravity, 'he's all that, and much more beside. He's an open-handed, good-hearted gentleman, as I have known for years, and known nothing but good of him. He has always a kind word for a poor man, and he comes from the same place as I comes from down in the Midlands.'

'That's very interesting,' answered Dick, endeavouring to show his appreciation of this touch of local pathos; 'and, mind you, all that will help you to make him less suspicious of you, and inclined to believe your tale. Perhaps you could contrive to appear a little drunk that night, which would account for your mistaking things.'

'Mistaking the Captin and Co. for his friends, you mean, and his being dragged into their house for a genteel invitation?'

'Just so; and also for your forgetting the number,' suggested Dick.

'Poor Master Matthew!' said Mr. Rutherford, soliloquising. 'It don't seem a very

nice return for his kindness to me, does it ? It was his wife's father, Dick—though he *was* a parson and a beak—as got me out of my poaching trouble down yonder ; mostly, I think, for Miss Isabel's sake as was.'

'Oh, cuss his wife's father !' cried Mr. Dartmoor, with sudden exasperation at the introduction of so extraneous a matter. 'Who ever heard a human cretur' not in liquor go on in this way ? We ain't a-going to lock his wife's father up in Grain Place, nor yet his wife.'

'No, that's wheer it is, Dick,' answered the other quietly. 'If his wife—that's Miss Isabel as was—was to be with him, it would not be so bad for either of 'em. For they two are one, they are, just as the parson puts it, and no blooming lie. It would break her heart, it would, I do believe. For she's a tender plant ; and she's just had a baby-boy, which don't go far to strengthen her. Ever since that child come, Master Matthew he's another man : more bright and cheery like, and yet more loath than ever to leave his

home o' nights. What ! she to be all alone there, with her child, a-waiting for him—through all the winter night—and not to see him after all ! No, Dick, I couldn't do it.'

' Well, I *am* darned ! Of all the milk-and-water chaps that ever kep a keb you are *the* wishiest-washiest ! Just because a woman in the course of nature, and *being* married, happens to have a baby-boy, you——'

' No, Dick, no ! ' interrupted Mr. Rutherford, apologetically ; ' it is not *that*. For my part, I don't hold with babies in a general way ; but Mrs. Helston, when my wife was down with fever, and all the Mews fought shy of her thinking it was scarlet—which it only was to look at, not to ketch—she used to come every day (because of old times, she said, when *her* mother was tended by Sally's down at Tarlton), and never without something good to eat or drink for my poor missus ; and —— No, Dick, I *ain't* such a blackguard as you—though she tells me I soon shall be—and I can't oblige you in this

little matter—I can't indeed.' And with that 'honest John' rose from his chair and put his hand out for his sou'-wester.

'Rutherford,' cried Dick, rising too, and laying his hand upon the other's wrist, 'don't throw a chance like this away, which will never happen to you twice. You are acting under a mistake, I see ; you thinks there will be murder done.'

'Thinks !' answered John contemptuously; 'I *knows* there will. Master Matthew will never give up them diamonds for the asking—save with his life.'

'Mr. Rutherford,' cried Dick, standing with his back against the door, 'I have deceived you. It was only natural I should try to get the work done cheap—such a little work it seemed, too, and such great pay. But the Capting said two hundred pounds—not one. One hundred pounds for stopping your keb, and another for driving on agen.'

'Oh, he did, did he ?' returned the other coolly, as he folded a woollen comforter about his neck—for the weather without was wet

and cold. 'Well, that of course would have made a difference had my mind not been made up from the first to have nothing to do with it. I don't blame *you*, mind, but only the Captin. There are some folks as is born foolish, while others fuddles themselves afterwards with constant nips.'

To this injurious and (to say truth) somewhat ungrateful speech, his host for a few moments replied nothing, but simply stared at his departing guest in a sort of imbecile despair; then a gleam of intelligence lit up his sodden face. 'John Rutherford,' he said, shaking his forefinger at the other—or rather pointing it, for it shook of itself—'I know why you won't join us. You're a deep un, you are; and all the deeper because you talks so smooth and looks so shallow.'

'Well, what is it?' said John, smiling, either in acknowledgment of this compliment, or at some inward thought which tickled him.

'Well, *this* is it—you are arter them diamonds yourself, my man.'

‘I have been arter ’em a good while, Dick, in the sense of sitting behind ’em on my ’ansum.’

‘I don’t mean *that*. You mean to have ’em independent of us. If you’ll take a friend’s advice, you’ll drop that game, John Rutherford ; it’s a dangerous one.’

‘Still, nothing ventur nothing have, Mr Dartmoor,’ replied the other coolly.

‘And yet, when *we* ask you just to stop your keb and then drive on again, you talk of the risks ! Let me tell you that those risks is nothing—*nothing*—to the sartin death you’ll run upon if you cross the Capting in this matter, for he’s set his heart on it.’

‘I’m very much skeared of him, Dick—very,’ returned Mr. Rutherford cheerfully. ‘I trembles when I thinks about him—which perhaps you’ll kindly say to him, with my humble duty. But I knows a better trick than to run my head against a prison-wall for his sake for 200*l*. As for my own intentions in this here matter, I do confess I’ve thought about them diamonds a good deal.

I've thought they'd become my missus (for one thing) most uncommon; only it would excite suspicion in the Mews if she were to wear 'em in the verander; and what would be the good of them to her if she couldn't? I've thought as they'd sell for a pretty penny, on which I could myself retire from business, and keep a man to drive me out in my own keh. I've thought on 'em in all sorts o' shapes and ways; but what I never *have* thought of, Dick Dartmoor, is of getting them diamonds at the risk of life, and limb, and liberty for Captin Langton; or, to put it plainer, of pulling the chestnuts out of the fire for a dratted monkey.'

'And the fi'-pun-note, and the supper as you have been a-tucking into?' suggested Mr. Dartmoor, with honest indignation.

'The supper, Dick, you led me to understand was friendship's offering. I am sorry you did not tell me as it was at the Captin's expense, because it would have spared me—especially over them beautiful wheelks—the sense of a pussonal obligation. As to the

fiver, I once heard my missus read out of a book about somethin' being the pledge o' secrecy; and it's been paid me to hold my tongue. If it's any satisfaction to the Captin, you may tell him that it'll come in most uncommon useful.'

With that, and a pleasant nod and a smile, which spoke of fulness and content, Mr. John Rutherford took his leave of his would-be benefactor. But once in the street a change came over his homely features. 'I know'd it would come to this,' he murmured, 'sooner or later, as I told Master Matthew himself—it stands to reason as them diamonds must be collared. "Then why," says he, "has it not been done already?" "Well," says I, "what's everybody's business, you know, is nobody's business." And then, though I don't know why, he said—"That's good, though an old one," and began to laugh. It's no laughing matter now; that dratted monkey, as I called him (though he's a sight worse than that), means business, if ever it was meant. Well, *I* mean business,

too ; and the Captin's fiver comes handy for starting it.' He walked on talking to himself at intervals, but always with great gravity. ' They says as they're worth 25,000/. I wonder how much they'd run to at the pop-shop ? No need arter that to drive a keb, nor even to be a Captin. It's a sight of money, any way.'

CHAPTER XV.

A SOUL'S REBELLION.

HOWEVER reticent Mr. Rutherford had shown himself to Mr. Dartmoor with respect to Master Matthew's affairs, the information he *had* supplied to him was correct enough: there had been a little addition to the household in Cavendish Grove, which for the time, it was true enough, had made 'another man' of Matthew. This change for the better had not, however, been due to the actual arrival of the baby-boy, whatever bliss that might have conferred upon its mother. As a rule, unless there is some landed property depending on their advent, which would otherwise pass into hands but 'little more than kin and less than kind,' babies do not fill the heart of man with rapture. They have to develop a little in the way of gristle, if not bone, and

become a little less subject to indigestion's airy wing, before the male parent takes to them. Matthew's satisfaction arose mainly from the safety of his wife, about which he had long been devoured with anxiety; she was so very slight and delicate, and looked so like a child herself, that the troubles of maternity might well have been looked forward to with apprehension. She had got over them not only bravely (which was to have been expected), but, as the monthly nurse observed (who was a person of experience), in a highly creditable manner.

At first Matthew had grievously grudged the hours he had to pass away from her at the office; but as he always found her glad and smiling on his return, and getting quite strong and well, as she assured him, his apprehensions gradually vanished. As to the baby, it was not only the idol of its mother, but worshipped by Aunt Amy, and had received marks of allegiance from Uncle Stephen himself. In its scarlet and mottled stage it had not escaped that gentleman's

sarcasm (who had even ventured to compare its somewhat pappy and perilous consistency to that of a poached egg); but as days went on it chanced to 'take notice' for the first time by encircling Uncle Stephen's little finger with its tiny fist, whereby it established its supremacy.

How strange it is that almost all of us, however humble our social position, ascend at the beginning of life a throne which is likewise an altar, and rule at least one fellow-creature with undisputed sway! How few of us, however fortunate, can ever win our own way into the hearts of others as it is thus won for us by the kindly force of Nature! Alas! how soon she tires of us, or even grows *unkindly*, and makes that very love she caused to be showered upon us in our youth a source of bitterness through sad comparison!

We have said that for a time Matthew Helston's habitual melancholy was dissipated by this ray of sunshine, but it was only for a time. It is the misfortune of some folks that

they cannot look on the bright side of things, nor even take those 'short views' which the philosopher has so judiciously recommended. As the days went on, and his late source of anxiety was removed, or grew remote, another took its place. This was no less than the probability of the severance of his connection with Mr. Signet, which, if it really happened, would throw him on the wide world again with an added responsibility on his shoulders in the person of the little new-comer, and with not even the hopes which had once been entertained in Madge to buoy him up. He kept, of course, this fear from Sabey and the rest, but it began to haunt him, and not, it must be allowed, without reason.

Ever since that piece of information respecting Mr. Frank Barlow had been given by him to Mr. Signet, that gentleman's manner towards him had changed for the worse. He never, it is true, alluded to the cause, but Matthew knew the cause as well as though he had set it forth in writing. Nothing at the establishment in Paulet Street

was now done as it should be done by his 'confidential agent,' whose refusal, moreover, to act as such except for the few remaining weeks of the year was openly and repeatedly referred to.

Circumstances might arise, his employer once frankly told him, in case of Matthew's persistent refusal to perform that Moor Street errand, that would compel him to make a change in his establishment as at present constituted—the meaning of which periphrasis was, of course, plain enough to Matthew, and shadowed forth his dismissal. It may naturally be said that, being in such straits, it would have been but common prudence on Matthew's part to withdraw his objections and offer to continue his attendance on Lady Pargiter. But, in the first place, though Sabey had taken no harm in other respects from her recent trouble, she had become exceedingly nervous, and had expressed her satisfaction that with the end of the year these untimely excursions of her husband were to cease. 'I am never quite

happy in my mind,' she said, 'when you are away from me now, love; and in these winter nights especially I am always picturing something terrible as having happened to you. If I drop off to sleep, I have dreadful dreams of you; and if I lie awake, I lie in fear.'

She had never been affected in that way before; and though doubtless she had disliked his absence on those very expeditions much more than she pretended to do, she had accepted the necessity of it with cheerfulness, as she did all other trials. But now that she had been promised a relief from this trouble, it would be a disappointment indeed for her to have to face it anew. Moreover, Matthew had reason to suspect that, even should he waive his objections to perform the service in question, some other cause of disagreement with him would be soon discovered by Mr. Signet; in which case he would have humiliated himself, and, what was worse, made his wife wretched, with nothing gained.

It was not without reason, looked at from his own standpoint, that Mr. Signet had become what the vulgar term 'nasty' in these latter days. Twice since that entertainment at Cedar Villa, which had begun so hopefully for him, passed so delightfully, but ended so disastrously, had he made a call in Cavendish Grove, and on each occasion had Miss Thurlow been denied to him. He knew she was at home now, in attendance on her sister; but it seemed, or so he was informed, that Mrs. Helston was too indisposed to dispense with her presence upstairs. He had received the kind regards of the ladies from the gracious lips of Uncle Stephen, but that had by no means contented him. He resented such behaviour extremely, and, as we have seen, had begun to take it out of his subordinate in consequence; not, however, from any personal ill-will to him, but with a vague intention (as he did not hesitate to express it to himself) of putting the screw on. His nature, by this time at least, was not a generous one, and he had an idea

that by making things uncomfortable for Matthew he might by pressure win him over to his own views with respect to his sister-in-law. He quite believed that she was engaged to this Mr. Barlow; but a young lady's engagement was in his eyes by no means irrefragable, but rather of a conditional nature, dependent on whether anything better should turn up or not. And he was quite sure in this case that such a contingency had happened. He even persuaded himself that a wrong had been done to this beautiful and accomplished young creature, who, ignorant of the world and of her own merits, had been permitted too hastily to accept the attentions of an attorney in a small way of business, when, had she been given time, so much more splendid a future would have awaited her—and, in fact, still did so, if he could only get the opportunity of informing her of the fact, which was at present so persistently denied him.

Matthew Helston's character has indeed been ill portrayed if it is imagined that any

amount of 'squeezing' could mould it into the direction desired by Mr. Signet; but unhappily the squeezing did nevertheless affect it. It reawakened all the old bitterness of thought which, since those days of no employment and groundless trust in Madge, had been in abeyance, and which of late the tender associations of home had lulled to rest. How monstrous and abominable did it seem that he and his dear ones should lose their means of livelihood through this man's caprice, or because he was disappointed in an audacious expectation! How unjust it was that Skill and Diligence should be denied employment—for his gloomy mind, like the shadow of the event itself, pictured the blow as in act to fall—while Dulness was clothed in plenty, and Idleness revelled in excess!

Ignorant of the sting that drove him, it was with amazement that Mr. Durham heard his nephew utter sentiments with respect to the rights (or wrongs) of property, over their nightly pipes, which shocked philosophy

itself, and were altogether out of harmony with tobacco. At the time, indeed, he thought nothing serious of them, but set them down as little jets of radical spleen, rising from a natural and indeed an hereditary source, the springs of which chanced to be at somewhat higher pressure than usual ; but it was fated that the time should come when their expression had a deeper significance for him. One occasion, when Matthew, descending from the abstract to the concrete, inveighed against Lady Pargiter and her diamonds, was destined to recur with especial force. 'Why, my dear Matt,' Uncle Stephen had lightly answered, 'if Mr. Signet only heard you talk, so far from wishing you to continue the custodian of this treasure, he would be afraid of your dropping it into the river at high water, to spite her ladyship.'

'Nay, that would be to flout Fortune herself,' answered Matthew grimly. 'If I took the diamonds, it would certainly not be to enrich Father Thames with them. Good

Heavens!' he continued, rising from his seat, and pacing the little room excitedly, 'how strange it seems that half a dozen of these sparkling stones, which are now useless, or the cause of quarrel, or only serve to make more hideous the woman that wears them, would in worthier hands be competence and comfort; might realise the dreams of science, or ——'

'Or furnish the dreamer,' put in Uncle Stephen, slyly, 'with wholesome though compulsory employment for ten years at least, and with the lease of a cell in Portland, exquisitely clean, and with hot air upon the most improved system.'

'That is, indeed, another view of the question, and, of course, the more practical one,' admitted Matthew; and no more was said upon the subject; but Mr. Durham noticed that his nephew was more silent even than usual that evening, and looked like one consumed with some monopolising thought, or gnawing care.

In Sabey's presence, however, and in

Amy's, Matthew's brow was always clear ; and, indeed, it was very seldom that he 'showed his seamy side,' as he himself was wont to term his dissatisfaction with the world and its arrangements, even to his uncle.

CHAPTER XVI.

HIS LAST EVENING.

FRIDAY, the 4th of December, in the year of which we write, was remarkable for its extreme cold. No snow fell on that day, but much had fallen during the previous week—and where it fell, even in town, save for the ministrations of the street scavengers, it lay ; for it froze so hard that the wind could get no hold of it ; and the wind, denied its usual horse-play, went about like a roaring lion, seeking out other mischief. To most of us, in London, such inclement weather matters little ; neither our work nor our pastimes are carried on in the open air ; and, whatever the sailor may have retorted to the landsman concerning falling chimneypots, it is *not* so dangerous to walk

the streets on windy days as to sail the seas. Four-wheeled cabs and omnibuses may have their disadvantages, but they are not liable to be blown over ; while the underground railways afford a still greater sense of security. Locomotion, therefore, goes on as usual, the interruption of which is our only serious public calamity. An unusually keen and boisterous day is, in fact, rather hailed by the general public than otherwise, for it affords humorous incidents in the thoroughfares and a topic of conversation—which is a desideratum always—by the bright winter fires at night.

No doubt the little household in Cavendish Grove would have enjoyed their dinner as much as usual, despite the wintry blast that howled without and tore through the leafless gardens at the back as though there had been no walls between them, but for the sense that one of their number was doomed that night to face its power. He had already conveyed Lady Pargiter's diamonds to her

that evening, in order that she might wear them at a great ambassador's ball, and at three in the morning it would be his hard fate to fetch them again, for deposit in Paulet Street as usual. Moreover, he had a severe cold upon him, though he thought little of that—as it was his habit to think little of all physical ailments—and concealed its existence as much as possible.

On the other hand, it was a great satisfaction to his wife to reflect that this was the last time he would be dragged from home at these untimely hours, since Lady Pargiter, it was understood, was going into the country for Christmas, and the new year was to free Matthew from such unpleasant errands. Moreover, what was a source of satisfaction to all was that, for the first time since the arrival of the 'little stranger,' Sabey herself was present at the family meal. She was bright and merry, and looked well, though, as Uncle Stephen averred, 'more like a piece of eggshell china than ever;' that is to say, she had that exquisitely delicate air which

belongs to some women of her type, and is especially noticeable after the troubles of maternity have been recently surmounted. Amy, too, was looking her best and brightest, which may be partly accounted for by the fact that Mr. Frank Barlow made one of the party. It is probable he had not been informed of Mr. Signet's recent attentions—or attempts at attentions; but if he had, it is certain that they had in no way discomposed him. He narrated with some humour a scene in the law courts that morning, arising out of a case (we may be sure) in which Bates and Barlow (his senior partner was Bates) were concerned for the fortunate party. They had been long endeavouring to obtain a certificate in the Court of Bankruptcy for a certain client of theirs whose failure in the shipping trade had been something more than disastrous. Their chief hope had been in the deafness and absence of mind of the Judge; but until that morning the keenness of the opposing creditors' legal adviser had been such that no oppor-

tunity had been offered them. Perceiving their enemy to have gone out to lunch before 'the Court' rose for that purpose, they had seized the favourable moment for their application. Their counsel rose and explained as briefly as possible how his client had lost his money through the foundering of the ship *Paramatta*—averred by some to have been scuttled, but whose loss he, of course, described as a visitation of Providence. But for the *Paramatta*, his client would have still been rich and respected: but for the *Paramatta*, this application—humiliating to such a man to have to make—would never have been necessitated. The Judge, eager for lunch, only half-hearing what was said, and dazed with the frequent mention of the name of this unhappy vessel, inquired suddenly, 'Does Mr. Paramatta oppose?'

This was the question, if only another name had been substituted, of which of all others the counsel was most apprehensive.

'The *Paramatta* is a ship, my lord,' he was obliged to murmur.

‘I don’t ask what he *is*,’ exclaimed the Judge irascibly; ‘I ask does he oppose?’

‘Mr. Paramatta does not oppose, my lud.’

‘Very good; then your client may have his certificate.’

So when the counsel for the opposition came in from lunch they found themselves checkmated. At this narrative (as savouring somewhat of sharp practice) Amy was so much more shocked than amused, that Mr. Barlow had to explain that the device was entirely the affair of the barrister, and could have had no place in the instructions from his attorneys, which were always as pure as the driven snow; but, on some lively badinage from Uncle Stephen and the rest upon that point, Amy was found to be ‘retained’ on Mr. Barlow’s side.

Perhaps nothing is a greater proof of the harmony of families than the occurrence of humorous conflicts, devoid of all ill-nature, among them, and in Cavendish Grove they were very frequent. Matthew bore his part as

best he could in them, but of late the shadow of calamity had been heavy on him, and it grew, like the creeping palsy, with every hour.

When that evening was over, and Uncle Stephen had left him after smoking his usual pipe, and 'light after light went out' in the house, 'and he was all alone,' his heart became very heavy. Notwithstanding that in some respects he was of a morbid disposition, he would have scorned the idea of being affected by any mere presentiment of evil; but on this occasion, when the echo of Sabey's silver laugh, and of his uncle's robust mirth, had died away, a despondency far greater than usual took possession of him. He did not even lift, as he was wont to do, the decent pall which covered his beloved Madge, but sat, with pipe in mouth (unconscious that its ashes were cold), his eyes fixed on vacancy, and his thoughts vaguely wandering into the future, that for him held no resting-place of hope. Presently, long after midnight, and in a lull of

the tempest that still reigned without, he heard Uncle Stephen's footsteps overhead. Thinking the old man might be ill, he took a candle and went softly up to his bedroom door and knocked, only to find Mr. Durham shivering in his shirt, and endeavouring to find a passage in *Æschylus* by the feeble flame of his night-light.

'I am sorry to have alarmed you, my dear Matt,' he said, 'but this passage haunts me, and my chief motto in life is, "Always verify quotation."'

As he went back Matthew looked into his wife's room, and found her sleeping, with the child clasped lovingly to her bosom. It was a comfort to him to find her thus lapped in bliss, and as unconscious of the melancholy that consumed him as of the kiss he gently pressed upon her brow. How he envied her the faith and hope that never failed her! How he envied Uncle Stephen that freedom from genuine care that could admit of so artificial a solicitude as a doubt about

Æschylus! Amy, too, was doubtless dreaming of her lover.

At a little after two o'clock, when he was about to prepare for his expedition, the front-door bell rang, and he found to his surprise that the cab had come for him. He scarcely ever failed to hear the noise of its wheels beforehand, and the wind that night blew from the south-east, a quarter that would have carried it to his ears. The reason of this unwonted silence was not far to seek: the snow had recommenced to fall, and the whole earth already lay in its white close-fitting shroud, while the wind howled over it like a mourner.

'A bitter night, Master Matthew,' said the cabman, descending from his perch and flapping his arms like a penguin.

'Well, it's the last, John, that we two shall be abroad in together. Come in, and have a glass of whisky before you start.'

'Thank you kindly, sir, I don't mind if I do,' which was John's phrase for acceptance of hospitality of that nature. When the

liquor was produced and his glass filled, 'Here's good luck to you, sir,' he said.

'Thank you,' said Matthew, not scornfully, but a little grimly. If the prayers for his welfare of some under that roof should avail him not, John's wishes were not likely to do so.

'And good luck to our trip,' added the latter, as he took his second draught, which emptied the glass.

'Do you, then, anticipate ill-luck?' inquired Matthew carelessly, because some reply seemed to be expected of him, rather than because he felt any interest in his own question. Though perfectly simple and without pride—though he had so keen a sense of self-respect—he had always some difficulty in getting on with men of Rutherford's class.

'Oh no, sir, not I; but since, as you say, it is our last trip, and nothing has yet gone wrong with us, it must happen to-night or never.'

‘I see. There is your cigar, John.’ As Matthew Helston turned to enter the cab he looked up at the window above (as it was his habit to do), and to his surprise perceived a light there; the curtain was half-withdrawn, and a face could be half-discerned, endeavouring, as it seemed, to pierce the snowy veil of the night.

He understood at once that it was his wife, who had been awakened by the unaccustomed ringing of the bell, and was straining her eyes to see the last of him. He kissed his hand, though she could see him not, and, entering the vehicle, was driven off.

Her faithful face watches the cab till the falling snow shuts it out from her view; then, with a sigh, succeeded by a smile, as her glance falls on her still sleeping babe, she returns to her pillow, to rest, pure soul, while rest she may.

To Matthew, on his road to Moor Street, nothing happens; but as his driver opens the cab-door for him to descend, the handle

catches Mr. John Rutherford's coat, which thereupon, falling open, discloses in his breast-pocket the butt of a pistol. But of this, Matthew—full of thought of Madge and misery—sees nothing, and goes in.

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